OVERLORD [9] The magic caster of Destroy *Kugane Maruyama*

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TV
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CAST

アインズ●日野聡

アルベド●原由実

シャルティア●上坂すみれ

AND MORE.

オーバーロード 9

破軍の魔法詠唱者

丸山くがね――著

illustration by so-bin

人類の運命を
にぎる？

鮮血帝ってこんな人
けっこうイケメン

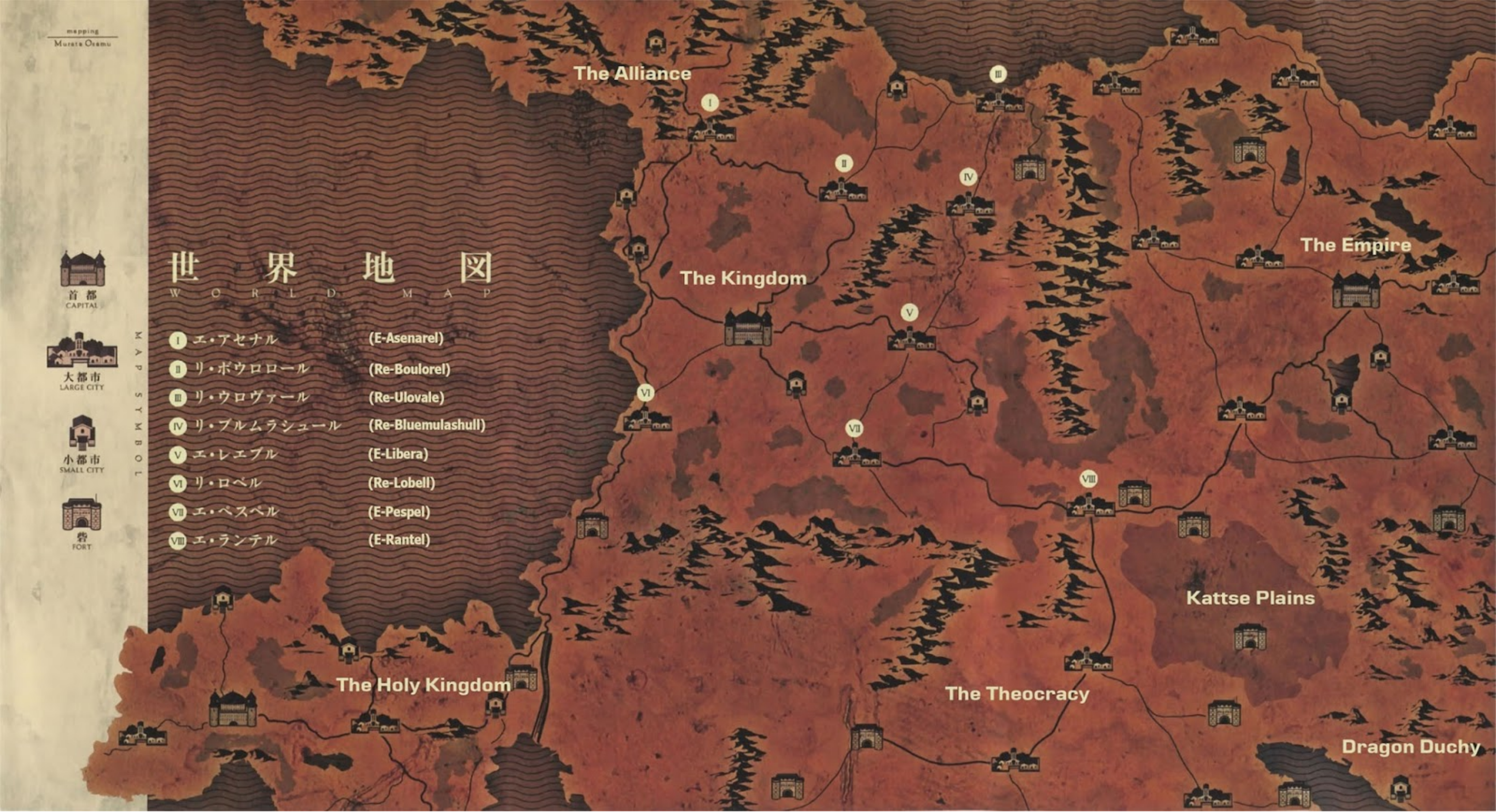
至高なる力に喝采を。

OVERLORD [9] The magic caster of Destroy Kugane Maruyama

illustration by so-bin

オーバーロード 9 破軍の魔法詠唱者

丸山くがね


mapping
Murata Osamu
世界地図
WORLD MAP
Ⅰ エ・アセナル (E-Asenarel)
Ⅱ リ・ボウロロール (Re-Boulorel)
Ⅲ リ・ウロヴァール (Re-Ulovale)
Ⅳ リ・ブルムラシュール (Re-Bluemulashull)
Ⅴ エ・レエブル (E-Libera)
Ⅵ リ・ロベル (Re-Lobell)
Ⅶ エ・ペスペル (E-Pespel)
Ⅷ エ・ランテル (E-Rantel)
首都
CAPITAL
大都市
LARGE CITY
小都市
SMALL CITY
砦
FORT
MAP SYMBOL
The Alliance
The Kingdom
The Empire
The Holy Kingdom
The Theocracy
Kattse Plains
Dragon Duchy
Ⅰ
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Prologue

Jircniv Rune Farlord el Nix — the supreme ruler of the Empire, and the young man who was dreaded as the Blood Emperor, reflected on his flawless performance.

He was confident that he had won his counterparts over using his charisma, that they were putty in his hands. There should have been no problems.

That was the specialty of the noble class. Especially so for the Emperor, who had been thoroughly educated in these ways from his youth, to the point where none would be able to see through his facade. To his guests, he should have appeared to be nothing more than a gentle and innocent young man.

The most important thing was to understand the thoughts of one's opponent and to lower their defenses. It would be difficult to glean information from someone who was filled with suspicion. However, by building trust and goodwill, one could slowly peel away the layers of guardedness surrounding them, until they were laid bare before oneself. Of course, such deceptions would be hidden behind the gentlemanly smile which said “we warmly welcome you.”

And the gentleman Jircniv's opponents were a pair of dark elves, who had barged into the Imperial city on the back of a dragon. This was the first time he had met individuals whose appearances belied their incredible power.

The earthquake triggered by the staff-wielding girl had claimed 117 lives. Of these, 40 had been his royal guards, 60 had been imperial knights, 8 had been arcane magic casters, 8 more had been divine magic casters, and one more — a truly jaw-dropping list of casualties.

As for the knights, being able to stand guard in the imperial city meant that they were among the most elite warriors in the empire, but at a stretch, one could say that they were not major losses. If they were to be ranked like adventurers, one might classify them as silver-rank. Due to the extensive systems in place for the education and training of new knights, these numbers could be easily replenished in the future.

Next were the royal guards, the elites among the elites. It was regrettable that more than half of these men, each the equivalent of a gold-class adventurer, had been slain at once. They were equipped with weapons and armor that had been forged and enchanted by the many magic casters of the Empire, a fortune that was worth more than their weight in gold.

And then, there was the most painful loss —the last man— one of the strongest knights in the Empire, "The Immovable" Nazami Enec.

Though he claimed he was just imitating a fighting style he'd seen before, that twin-shield stance of his had been enough for him to be recognized as one of the Empire's four strongest knights.

In this world, where the fighting prowess of one mighty warrior was more valuable than that of several hundred conscripts, the passing of such a warrior could not be simply described as one man’s death. In the worst case, it might even be seen as a weakening of the entire country's national power.

In truth, Jircniv should have immediately retreated to safety, but such an act would not befit a young conqueror like himself. Perhaps this was merely a show of strength or a threat, but all he could do was meet it with a welcoming smile.

Still, he could not let himself be led by the nose. Jircniv's eyes intently studied the two *children* in front of him, not letting a single movement or gesture escape his gaze. One could learn many things from even the most mundane of observations.

Jircniv had a nose for intrigue; he was able to determine if a noble under his gaze would be loyal to him, or secretly scheme against him. He sharpened his senses to the utmost, trying to glean the vital scraps of information from the two in front of him.

From their attire...

From the way they carried themselves...

But I digress.

The emissaries of Ainz Ooal Gown, the two dark elf children, were exceedingly attractive. He could not help but think that they when they grew up, they would break the hearts of many a member of the opposite sex.

Those small, slender bodies, with their ever-changing expressions. They seem like simple, ordinary children no matter how one looked at them. Knowing nothing else, it would be laughable to think that they were emissaries for anyone.

A country's emissaries —their ambassadors— required certain qualities, one of which was their personal appearance. Making a poor impression due to one's undignified deportment would be a detriment to one's country.

Ainz Ooal Gown should have understood this precept. Knowing this, what was the motive behind sending a pair of easily underestimated dark elves?

Jircniv racked his brains as he pondered the mystery.

From what I can gather... it must be a show of force. He’s juxtapositioning a scene of harmless meekness with overwhelming destructive power. The stark contrast between first and second impressions is meant to maximize the psychological impact on me... but if that was the case, wouldn't riding in on dragonback ruin the effect? The dragon's formidable presence would overrule their benign appearance... or is it that these two are the only ones suitable as emissaries? Or was there another— damn. I can't read their intentions. I have too little information.

He had several theories, but they vanished like foam on the waves.

My first priority should be gathering information on the opposition. Without this foundation to work on, nothing can be done. Then, I must confirm my opponents' intentions and desires, in a way that doesn't upset them. It would be a fool who allowed negotiations to break down because he angered the other party.

It was important to clarify Jircniv's aims here.

The two dark elves had said “The Emperor sent invaders to the Great Tomb of Nazarick”, and in an instant they had killed over a hundred people in the middle of court. But was this an actual state-sanctioned response, or were they just looking to pick a fight? Jircniv had to find out at least that much.

The invaders in question would certainly be the workers. If that was the case, the one giving them orders would definitely be Jircniv. However, there had been several degrees of separation from him; Jircniv's name should not even have been mentioned in the same breath as these people.
These people —Ainz Ooal Gown— how had they seen through his schemes? A different tack would have to be taken with them.

Since they came as emissaries, there should be a chance to glean some information from them. Even the slightest action might shed some light on their plans.

Behind the two of them was a foe who could boldly challenge a nation and conquer it with might and terror. Even a tiny mistake here could spell death for him.

A second earthquake would be the end of things here.

Jircniv turned his attention to the neighboring room.

It should have been filled with royal guards, and dozens of knights awaiting his orders. But today, he hadn't bothered. That was because even if he had put fifty royal guards in there, they could do nothing but die if they tried to fight against these two. Thus, there were only five guards in attendance for this meeting.

One of the Empire's Four Knights, "Lightning" Baziwood Peshmel. Jircniv’s most trusted advisor, Fluder Paradyne. There were also three trusted scribes.

He had also given orders for the royal guards to dig up the cracks in the courtyard for the corpses within. Though it seemed futile, he had ordered it anyway.

The Empire did not have anyone who could use resurrection spells. Even the adamantite ranked adventurers of the Empire did not have such power. Of the neighboring countries, perhaps only the Kingdom of Re-Estize and the Slane Theocracy could command such magic.

Even so, he still wanted to recover the bodies, because it was a waste to let the enchanted gear be lost with their owners. Also, recovering the bodies and laying them to rest would preserve morale and grant closure to the troops.

“Honored emissaries, you have travelled far and wide to grace us with your presence. Surely you must be thirsty? We have prepared some simple refreshments for you. We hope you will try some, if it pleases you to do so.”

Jircniv rang a chime, and the maidservants waiting outside quietly entered the room. There were over twenty maids, with covered silver trays.

After their arduous training, these maids moved with practiced, graceful ease.

But even in these movements, which made Jircniv secretly proud of their immaculate poise, he could detect slight missteps. It was precisely because the rest of their actions were so perfectly executed that the flaws stood out.

What's wrong? They've entertained so many dignitaries in the past without a hitch; why are they having problems now? Are they under the effect of some kind of magic?

Jircniv wanted to reach under his garments and grab his medallion of mental protection, but he forced himself to resist the urge. The medal was effective precisely because people did not know it was there; if they knew he possessed such an item, it would only end poorly for him.

When the maids faltered after looking on the two dark elves, he finally found his reason.

Aha, so that's why... it’s because they're fascinated by their looks. Well, it's not as though I don't understand... no, dammit. I mustn't make a fool of myself.

Perhaps, for only wavering this much in the face of such majesty, he should be praising the maids instead.

After depositing the drinks and snacks, the maids bowed and filed out.

“Then, please, do help yourselves.”

“Hmmm~”

The dark elf boy raised a glass with a bored expression on his face. It was easily a treasure in its own right, its transparent crystal etched with exquisite artistry. Although sculptured glass like this was not of particular interest to Jircniv, that wasn't to say that he did not appreciate such things. Even a simple eating utensil used to welcome a guest could be used to show of the glory of the Empire, to let them know exactly what kind of people they were dealing with.

The dark elf boy took a mouthful of the beverage.

No caution at all... is he not on guard for poison, or does he have magic that protects him from such things? Or did he already sense that I had no such intentions? ...or is it something else? Hm, that girl doesn't seem worried either.

“This doesn't taste particularly good. And there isn't anything else unusual about it either.”

The boy's words shocked Jircniv. Nobody had ever said something like this to him, even when he had been a child himself. When the surprise faded, it was replaced by a mild anger blazing up in his heart — *what a rude boy*. But of course, Jircniv wasn't foolish enough to let that irritation reach his face.

“Then, I sincerely apologize for the ill-treatment of your esteemed person,” Jircniv smiled at the boy. “I pray you might be so kind as to enlighten me as to your favored beverage, that I may prepare some for you on future visits.”

...Did nothing unusual mean no poison? Did he believe that I would be trying to poison him from the beginning? What did he mean by that?

“The things I want are probably things you can't prepare.”

“S-Sis, y-you're being rude...”

“Oh? Am I now?”

Sis? So he's not a boy, but a girl. They're not brother and sister, but just sisters?

Come to think of it, he did look like a girl.

Why... dressing as a male... no, perhaps she wanted to dress in clothes that allowed for freedom of movement? Children of their age are kind of androgynous anyway. What if... the other one was a male... no, the way she's dressed, there's no way she could be. Still... the younger sister's quite honest.

Although Jircniv had considered how to bring the girl with the staff over to his side, and how to build a good relationship with them, which might benefit the Empire, he still could not make his move without gaining more information.

To begin with, he could not forget how this “honest” girl had massacred so many of his men. Treading recklessly around her would be like sticking one's hand into the maw of a sleeping dragon.

Still, it's something. I need to see how the other side plays their cards.

“Then, honored guest, allow me to introduce myself once more. I am Jircniv Rune Farlord el Nix of the Baharuth Empire. I am certainly cognizant of Lady Fiora's own noble name, but might I inquire as to yours?”

“Ah, I- I'm Mare Bello Fiore.”

“My deepest thanks, Lady Fiore. Then, with reference to what Lady Fiora said, specifically ‘Lord Ainz is very unhappy and will destroy this country unless he is appeased’… I assume that I, as the presumed offender in question, will be making my way to Nazarick?”

“Isn't that obvious?”

A simple line, but dripping with frostiness.

From the beginning, the dark elf called Aura had no warmth in her eyes. She looked at people like she was looking at insects.

Then, a question.

Technically speaking, there was nothing wrong with what they said, but the question still remained as to how much weight their words should be given, as well as how they had learned about his involvement. Under normal circumstances, he would confuse them with blather and then take action, but the people in front of him were anything but normal.

“Then... am I right to say that Ainz Ooal Gown-dono was fine with personally ordering the two of you to come here?”

“Yes, he was... what about it?”

“Nothing, I was just making sure.”

Jircniv sank deep into thought.

Who was Ainz Ooal Gown? A dark elf, a tomb, a dragon, none of these went together. There had to be some common factor between them. Was he a dark elf who once lived in a forest, then moved into a tomb on the plains? Then the dragon would be the pet monster of the dark elf tribe leader Ainz Ooal Gown.

Jircniv dispersed his wild theories.

...I should leave the tales to the bards. My job is collecting information and learning the truth.

What he knew now was that the other side had a way of gaining information from within the Empire. So did he have a far-reaching web of spies, or...

Ainz Ooal Gown is a person who carefully analyzes information. Then I must confirm this.

“He ordered you to come on a dragon?”

“Y-yes, Lord Ainz told us to do so.”

“I see... so that's what it is…”

“What are you getting at, asking all these weird questions? Are you apologizing? Or not coming? If you're not coming, we'll take your words back, but that means your country's doomed.”

There was a saying, “one cannot gain a dragon’s eggs without entering a dragon’s lair”.

It meant that one could not make great gains without taking great risks.

With that in mind, Jircniv steeled himself.

“Naturally, I wish to expiate my wrongdoings before him. Though I have no impression of sending anyone to a place called Nazarick, it is entirely possible that one of my underlings might have acted rashly, and independently of my orders. That being the case, the ultimate responsibility lies with their overall superior — namely, myself.”

From the corner of his field of vision, he saw the three scribes' eyes widening fractionally, while Fluder nodded in approval.

“Huh~ all right. Let's go now, then.”

“Now? Hold on, please. While I have no issue with leaving presently, I am still the ruler of this country, and I cannot simply vacate the seat of power all of a sudden. Perhaps, two, maybe three days...”

Jircniv glanced at the twins to make sure it was all right before continuing.

“...in order to get the affairs of state in order before I leave. After adding in the time to settle some other pressing matters and preparing the reparations for his Lordship, I think ten days should—”

“Ten days? That's a bit long, don't you think?”

“With ten days, I will surely be able to prepare adequate recompense. A thoughtless offering would be a grave insult to your lord. Then there is the matter of finding the parties involved. The Empire is large — scouring it will require an appropriate amount of time.”

The matter of compensation drove Aura into deep thought. Even Mare on the side didn't seem to know how to proceed.

I see... upon hearing the subject of an appropriate gift, they were distracted. That means they revere their master that much. I should be able to buy some time with this.

But before Jircniv could continue, Aura spoke first.

“Just kidding. Lord Ainz just told me to tell you to come over now, where ‘now’ was defined as ‘however long you think you need’.”

Though he wanted to spit on Ainz Ooal Gown, who had seen through his schemes, at the same time he also felt that his opponent was both intelligent and a worthy foe.

So he wanted to see how I'd react to the demand of "now", then. Well well, Ainz Ooal Gown, you're a tricky negotiator. You must be quite the sage to have foreseen the path this conversation would take.

“I said something, aren't you going to reply?”

Aura's cold voice made Jircniv feel like he was drowning in a swamp.

“Ah— ah, forgive me. I was merely contemplating what to prepare if I didn't have enough time.”

“Huh~ well, it doesn't matter. Then... can you give me an answer? How long before we can expect you to come over to Nazarick?”

“Just so,” Jircniv ignored Aura's provocation. “All preparations considered, I think I will be able to pay you a visit in five days' time.”

“Got it. Then, we'll let Lord Ainz know. Ah, that reminds me, should we help you dig out the guys buried alive out there? Though…”

Aura clapped her hands together, and her smile was far too malicious to be childlike.

“...They may have gotten just a teeny bit squashed. That might be a bit hard to fix.”

Jircniv continued smiling, because the opposition's aim right now was far too transparent.

People revealed their true nature during times of great emotion. So fear was their way of probing him. Jircniv had used this technique during negotiations himself, but times like these were also a chance to thwart one's opponent's aims.

“Then, I am grateful for your assistance. I shall leave the rest to you.”

Seeing the plain emotion on Aura's face, Jircniv allowed himself to smile honestly for the first time.

Chapter 1 - A War of Words

OVERLORD ［9］ The magic caster of Destroy

1章 舌戦

Part 1

Six luxurious carriages raced over the plains.

Their motion was surprisingly stable despite the fact that they were galloping over rough ground.

To start, the wheels of each carriage were magic items called ‘Comfortable Wheels’. In addition, the chassis of the carriages had also been treated by a magic item called ‘Lightweight Cargo’.

These unbelievably magnificent carriages commanded an eye-popping price, but just as astonishing were the creatures which pulled them. The eight-legged magical beasts looked like horses and were known as ‘Sleipnirs’.

Calculating the precise cost of fielding six of these vehicles was an exercise in foolishness.

These vehicles —far out of reach of the merely wealthy— were escorted by a group of riders mounted on powerful horses.

There were over twenty of these riders, each clad in chainmail armor, armed with longswords on their belts and crossbows on their backs.

Yet, a woman rode at the head of all these men.

Alone among all these warriors, she wore a suit of heavy full plate armor. In addition to her full plate, she carried a cavalry lance in the same way foot soldiers might hold a spear. Her helmet's visor was raised, but the right side of her face was covered by some kind of golden cloth, which made her look quite unique.

Although this band of horsemen were the very picture of mercenary warriors, but their practiced movements and their clipped, precise words were nothing like that of a common sellsword. Their eyes were keen, and their level of alertness was high.

Some might have taken their unceasing vigilance to be a form of paranoia or cowardice, but in a world where magic was real and monsters flew through the air and ran wild over the land, even being on guard against everything they could see was not enough to guarantee their safety.

There were giant spiders which could survive for months without drinking while lying in wait for their prey, formless shapeshifters that resembled banks of fog, unclean monsters that slid through the air, venomous lizards with petrifying gazes that could only be avoided if they were encountered on open ground…

They were all on edge because they were wary of monsters with such deadly powers. However, normal mercenaries did not go to such lengths for alertness.

The thing that set them apart from mere mercenaries were the invisible people in the air. They were a band of riders who were keeping pace with the riders on the ground while under the effects of invisibility magic.

There were creatures called hippogriffs in this world. They were born of the mating of a male griffin and a mare, and these magical beasts had the front half of a griffin and the hind quarters of a horse. Perhaps it was because of their mixed blood, but hippogriffs were easier to rear and train than griffins, and they were very popular as flying mounts.

And then, there were the riders of these beasts to consider.

Flying creatures —even if they were monsters— would command an extremely high price if they were put on the market. They would not be something that simple sellswords could afford.

Indeed, the entire act of being mercenaries was a facade intended to deceive various people.

The true identities of those on the ground were the Empire’s royal guards, while the ones in the air were the Imperial Air Guard. The latter were elite troops who were shrouded in invisibility mantles that cloaked both riders and their mounts from sight.

Of course, that meant the owner of the carriages was none other than the ruler of the Baharuth Empire, Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix himself.

There were several reasons why he had disguised his unit like this, but the biggest one was because the Emperor and his knights openly riding through Kingdom territory would cause an international incident — and that could not be allowed to happen. As such, the exterior of the carriages was more plain than the interior — although it was still far more luxurious than regular carriages.

In this convoy, the security around the third carriage from the rear —Jircniv’s carriage— was heavier than those around the others.

Even the roof of his carriage had been refitted and now there were two archers hiding in the luggage compartment.

The interior of the carriage was supremely decadent. Judging by the furnishings alone, it was more akin to a high-class suite than a simple carriage, from the furred upholstery on the walls and floor to the soft and comfortable seats, which had been designed to not cause even the slightest bit of discomfort over long journeys.

Only three people were permitted to share this luxurious conveyance with Jircniv, which meant that total of four people occupied the space of the cabin. Although the idea of four people squeezing into a single carriage might seem restrictive and uncomfortable, that was merely the uninformed imagination of those who had never rode in a first-class carriage before. In truth, all four of them had adequate space to sit in any way they chose.

“—Your Majesty, Your Majesty, perhaps it is time to wake?”

The voice stirred Jircniv from his doze.

His fingers pinched at the bridge of his nose, and he yawned, followed by a grunt as he stretched himself out. Relief flowed through him as his stiff body loosened up and he yawned again.

“Your Majesty, it seems like you had a good rest, but are you still troubled?”

Jircniv shook his head at the man who had woken him up, the secretary Roune Varmilinen, who had been allowed to ride in the same carriage as the Emperor.

“Ah, no, it’s nothing like that. I still need some time to clear my head, I’m feeling better now. Although, it seems my afternoon nap took a fair bit longer than expected. Have I even slept that long since I was a child? After all, there’s a whole mountain of unfinished business back in the capital, and I never had the time to waste on that sort of thing… but now that I’ve begun this journey, I find that I no longer have anything to do. Perhaps I should thank Gown for this.”

“Ah, indeed, Your Majesty’s always busy, but why’s that?”

The man who spoke as though he wasn’t addressing the Emperor was the leader of the Empire’s Four Knights, Baziwood.

Normally, those words would have invited censure, but nobody in the carriage said anything.

Jircniv smiled bitterly and replied to his excessively informal, yet excellent subordinate:

“The blame for that can be laid at the feet of the Blood Emperor, because his reforms were pushed through too quickly for society to catch up with them. He is truly a foolish man. So much effort could have been saved if only he’d waited and accumulated a corps of competent men before taking action. You lot should scold him when you get the chance. Ah, but remember, when you do, you should suggest an appropriate course of action for him to take as well.”

Everyone in the cabin smiled wryly in response.

Originally, the administration of the Empire was left to the nobles — in particular, the Court Council. Seats on the Council were entrusted to those who had been educated since birth to handle them, or to those with enough money to invent an appropriate reason to be awarded such responsibility. Given the benefits such positions conferred, that was only natural.

However, due to Jircniv’s purge of the nobles, the amount of officials and bureaucrats had been reduced, but the work that they had to do had only increased. While this was a logical consequence of such actions, it meant that the workload of everyone involved had increased explosively, and Jircniv himself was no exception.

It was only after he had done away with numerous worthless nobles by the power of the Blood Emperor that he realized that even such worthless individuals had their uses.

Still, he did not regret his decision.

He had to carry out his purge when he did. Had he missed the chance, the authority to command the knights would have been stripped from him by the nobles, and his father’s death would have been meaningless.

And so he gave the word, and opened a path to the future for the Empire.

Women had to endure pain in order to give birth to a child. Similarly, the vast amounts of work he did every day was a necessary pain he had to endure in order to give birth to a radiant and reborn Empire. Beyond the difficulty that lay before him now was the treasure that he sought.

That line of thinking brought the topic of his own descendants to Jircniv’s mind.

Jircniv was not married, but he already had children. He had not yet taken an empress consort and merely sired some offspring with a few women that couldn't even be considered mistresses, only concubines that he felt some affection for.

Unfortunately, there was no love in those relationships, but he hoped one of his children would prove to be suitably talented.

In the future, if his empress' children were incompetent, and his concubines' offspring turned out to be more suitable, he would gladly switch their places in the succession as needed.

"Even so, all the work that I laboured day and night to complete can hardly be considered the regular state of the country's affairs. If only I could train up a cadre of officials that could take over these tasks… it would let me return to the tasks I should be doing, making high-level pronouncements like the Emperors of old. And I certainly don't want my child, the next Emperor, to have to suffer as I did. After all, if my descendants are overstressed, they'll curse my name."

The present Empire had been built by the work of an excellent young man, or rather, generations of talented men had laid the stable foundation that was the Empire. It was this foundation that Jircniv intended to use for building his great work, the Empire of the future. However, that did not guarantee that the next Emperor or the one after him would be equally talented.

Can I build an Empire that will stand the test of time, and a bureaucracy which can run the country without the need for a talented ruler at the helm? Jircniv wondered.

“That would be very difficult. After all, Your Majesty has changed the Empire by his absolute power, and you cannot administer the country in the ways the old Emperors did.”

“Varmilinen, your job is to find a way to achieve my aims. Of course I possess absolute power; all the Emperors of the past labored to concentrate the powers of the nation in their office. However, even if I am such a supreme being, it would be wrong to micromanage the affairs of state. If that happened, then what use would bureaucrats be? Perhaps you’ve misplaced your head.”

“At the very least, he would not have left it in the Imperial Magic Caster Academy, Your Majesty.”

Those words were spoken by Fluder Paradyne, one of the senior members of the Imperial Magical Academy and also the highest-ranking member of the Ministry of Magic. The implication was that his academy would not have raised such a fool.

“Haha, yes, you’re right, gramps,”

Jircniv coughed softly, and with that, the mood inside the carriage turned serious.

“In my generation, the Empire has returned to its youth, like a newborn child. We will cast out that which is old and rotted and replace it with the new. As Varmilinen said, I will have to work hard until the Empire matures, but if it never grows, that would be disastrous. In the future, I will only define general goals for the Empire, and the officials under me will help make those goals a reality.”

A country ruled by a single man was weak. Jircniv was abundantly clear on that point.

Roune lowered his head, whose hair was greying and thin in contrast to his age, and awaited his Emperor’s command.

“The Emperor of the next generation… speaking of which, did Your Majesty have a child with that one?”

Jircniv instantly knew who Baziwood meant by “that one”. After all, Baziwood knew that Jircniv was particularly fond of one of the concubines.

Jircniv’s paramours were selected for their looks or their parents’ status, but one woman among them ignored those criteria. This woman had been chosen for her intellect, rather than for her appearance or her breeding. Thus, she was allowed to discuss politics with Jircniv —though not in public and only in bed— and she was the only woman he allowed to do so.

At first, he had not intended to take her as a concubine at all, but things had ended up like this at her own insistence.

Jircniv, however, would have been happy if she had become his empress consort.

“No, that isn’t what she desires. She went so far as to say, ‘Looks are a treasure you are born with, and to those who occupy the upper echelons of society, they are an important trait. One can compensate for a lack of intellect with hard work or excellent subordinates, but looks cannot be changed.’ or something like that.”

“Won’t Your Majesty’s bloodline alone will ensure that any child of your union will be pleasant to look upon? Well, it’s true that any of your subordinates would be happier to receive orders from a good-looking Emperor.”

“Is that how it really is?”

Jircniv had no superiors and had no way of relating to this situation. On his part, he would use a capable person regardless of how ugly they were, and even give them a key position if needed.

“At the very least, it would be better than having to look at some toad. After all, wouldn’t Your Majesty prefer the woman shaking her hips on top of you to be a beautiful one?”

"…I suppose so, yes. Well, it's not like I don't get where you're coming from, but… is that really the case?"

Jircniv cricked his neck. Something was amiss, but he wasn't sure what it was.

"Then, in that case, who would Your Majesty take as his wife?"

Fluder's question made Jircniv furrow his brows.

"Well, if I had to choose between marrying someone from within the country or outside the country, I would have to go with the latter. There are no benefits to marrying a native, so, who to marry from outside the Empire… well, there's that unreadable woman that fellow recommended."

Fluder stroked his beard.

"Princess Renner, is it?"

Jircniv furrowed his brows again.

The third princess of the Re-Estize Kingdom — Renner Theiere Chardon ryle Vaiself.

She was known as the "Golden Princess", and her looks and reputation matched her nickname, but for several years she had ranked number one on Jircniv's list of women he despised the most. In contrast, the kind of woman he most preferred would be someone like Mayor Kabelia, who administered the city of Peibart in the City-States.

“I have no idea what that woman is thinking. After hearing about her actions, it’s almost as if she failed because she wanted to fail.”

Although Jircniv thought that such people should not exist, he recognized that humans were strange and complex enough that he could not rule out the possibility of such cases. Then, if she truly did plan to fail from the start, what was she planning? The more he tried to understand Renner’s way of thinking, the more he felt like like he was being tangled in a spider’s web. It was a thoroughly unpleasant feeling.

“…If only someone could help me get rid of that nauseating woman.”

“We will hire Ijaniya right away, if that’s what his Majesty desires.”

“Ijaniya” was a group of assassins that took on the name of one of the Thirteen Heroes for themselves. They were based between the northeast corner of the Empire and the City-State Alliance, and they were adept at using unusual methods. Although he had tried to bring them under their wing as a black ops department, they had not responded to the Empire’s overtures.

“Enough of that, we need that woman’s revolutionary insights. It’s better to let her live rather than to kill her…Hm. Did that woman take this development into account as well?”

“Could anyone have planned that far ahead?”

“As if,” Jircniv said, but even as he gave that answer, he had to admit that it was a possibility.

Renner’s words had been transmitted to Jircniv through their spies in the Kingdom. The policies she proposed were such that Jircniv could not help but admire them. The fact that those policies had then been quietly adopted by the Empire was a ringing endorsement of their practicality.

It would be a bad thing for the Empire if anything happened to her.

The timing of Renner’s suggestions to the Kingdom made him wonder if she had anticipated the Empire’s movements. If that was true, it meant that Renner could predict the Empire’s plans without any reliable sources from within.

As a result, even Jircniv, who coveted the Warrior-Captain Gazef’s strength for the Empire, could not bring himself to desire her.

“The Kingdom won’t be unduly harmed even if the Princess dies, but on the contrary, the Empire is finished if Your Majesty perishes. We, the Four Knights, might be able to deal with assassins, but other factors are a different matter entirely, so I hope Your Majesty does not immerse himself too deeply into his work.”

“Of course. No matter the reason, I cannot allow myself to die before a strong government has been formed for the Empire.”

If the head of an organization —its most critical person— was lost, it implied that the catastrophic collapse of the organization would soon follow.

The Empire might become a great nation in the future. If anyone knew this and wanted to prevent it, they would sacrifice anything to forestall that rise by turning the Emperor into a martyr. The most likely suspects were the nearby countries, like the Kingdom and the Theocracy.

Part of the reason why he wanted Ijaniya under his wing was so that they could be used as counter-assassins.

“That’s right, if Your Majesty were to perish, things would be troublesome. We have divine magic casters on standby to ward against poison and injury, but in the end, we still lack sufficient skilled personnel for these duties. I wish my dabbling in that field was more extensive, but my grasp of divine magic is still inadequate to the task.”

“Well, you’re already excellent as an arcane magic caster, so a small weakness like that can’t be helped. Oh, yes. We’ve asked for the Theocracy’s help, but haven’t received any response from them. Why not let the temples of the Four Gods and the minor gods compete with each other? Then let the Empire back whichever of the faith that produces the best results.”

Competition was the driving force for the development of new techniques. However, the mention of that made Roune shake his head violently, tossing his sparse hair about his forehead.

“It’s too dangerous. The temples in the Empire are supported by donations from the populace, and they remain independent by selling various products only they know how to manufacture. If the Empire exerts any undue influence on them or interferes with their livelihoods, the repercussions could be… severe.”

“That’s true… if only we could nationalize the various temples, the Empire would grow stronger. In that respect, the Theocracy has done an excellent job. I wonder what methods they used to keep the priests in line all these centuries?”

“The practice of divine magic is closely linked to everyone’s health, so I think it would be a good idea if we could have more divine magic casters be knights, or at least, teach knights how to use divine magic. Hacking and slashing at monsters with swords alone only produces casualties.”

Baziwood was a man who had had to hunt down monsters in the past, and he had spent his fair share of time on the edge of death. He nodded, and continued in a low tone.

“Personally, I would feel safer if I could count on resurrection magic. With that, we could reduce the number of situations where people mourned the loss of talented young men. Although, I’ve heard that resurrection magic consumes life force, and ordinary people will be reduced to glowing ash if they’re resurrected. Is that true?”

Fluder shifted his body forward.

Perhaps this old man had been the Emperor’s tutor for too long, or perhaps it was because his pet topic of magic had come up, but now, he was speaking animatedly, his eyes alight. Jircniv knew the old man would ramble on and on once he started on this subject, and Baziwood saw a look of annoyance cross the young Emperor’s face.

“That is a fact. Among the fifth-tier divine spells, the resurrection magic ‘Raise Dead’ consumes vast quantities of life force. Perhaps higher-tiered resurrection spells might reduce the requirement for life force… but no living person can use those, so that is merely academic. Then again, I have heard that the Dragon Lords and their ancient magic could return the dead to life without the loss of any life force—”

“—Then, could the Queen of the Draconic Kingdom achieve such feats?”

“An excellent question, Varmilinen. Indeed, that country’s queen has been confirmed to have inherited the ability to use what we call ancient magic, or primal magic, or perhaps the magic of the soul. There are many names for this kind of magic. This is because the blood of the Brightness Dragon Lord flows within her veins — that is known. The only question is whether or not she can use resurrection magic. Ancient magic and our current style of magic are completely different from each other, and we who can only use modern magic may never be able to understand it.”

Fluder closed his mouth, and at the same time Jircniv stared at him. Although irritation and worry was evident on Jircniv’s face, Fluder’s next words put him at ease.

“Ancient magic… how I want to research it. If only those with the bloodline of the Brightness Dragon Lord can use it, then the pedigree is the most important thing. Therefore, I feel that if Your Majesty is to wed, he would do well to select that Queen or one of her relatives…”

“Give me a break, Gramps… I’m not interested in old hags who pretend to be little girls…”

He did not even want to think about having to marry the woman who ranked second on his list of most hated women. In addition, even if he did not love his offspring, it would be far too cruel to have them become guinea pigs.

Even so, if he had to weigh that cruelty against the benefits the Empire would reap, there was no telling which course of action he would decide on.

At this moment, a loud knocking came from the carriage door.

This carriage had been fitted with defenses against physical attacks and information-type magic. The entire chassis was covered in metal sheeting, and as such it didn’t even have windows. Baziwood stood and cracked the door open to peek outside — or rather, at the person who had knocked on the door.

Although they were surrounded by knights protecting them and he was sure that this person was a friendly, he couldn’t help but remain on guard against an unexpected situation.

“Your Majesty, it’s Leinas.”

“Open the door.”

The fresh air from the plains flowed in as the door opened fully, blowing through the hair of everyone within. During this season, the air coming in from the outside should have been cold, but the breeze that reached the people inside was comfortably warm.

Needless to say, this was the result of magic used on this carriage.

The rider keeping pace with the carriage was the woman who had been at the head of the formation.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty. There’s—”

It was hard to make out her words over the rushing of the wind between them.

“This is no way to talk. Come in, don’t stand on ceremony.”

“Understood. Then, permit me this intrusion.”

With that, she gracefully vaulted off her horse and landed elegantly in the doorway of the moving carriage. Although she made it look simple, given that she was wearing full plate armor and that both her horse and the carriage were moving at a full gallop, it was proof that she had considerable athletic ability.

Still, that was only to be expected of one of the Four Knights that were the pride of the Empire. Among them, she had the greatest offensive ability. Her name was Leinas Rockbluth, also known as “Heavy Explosion”.

After transferring to the carriage, Leinas quietly closed the door behind her and took a seat beside Baziwood. The last thing they saw as the outside world was shut out, were the reins of Leinas’ horse being taken by one of the knights riding beside her.

Since the carriage’s magic would only warm the air that entered it, anything cold that came inside would remain that way. Considering Leinas was wearing a suit of full plate armor that had been chilled by the wind shear outside, she was like a block of ice when she took a seat next to Baziwood, who could not help but shiver.

“The people we sent ahead have sent a ‘Message’ to us.”

One of the defenses offered by this carriage was interference against information-type magic cast from the outside. Although it would prevent the enemy from finding them with spells, it also meant spells like ‘Message’ would be blocked, so it was her duty to receive ‘Messages’ on Jircniv’s behalf.

“The outrider element has reached the Great Tomb of Nazarick. There appears to be a log house at that location, and after they informed the waiting maids of Your Majesty’s time of arrival, the maids replied that there would be a welcome waiting for Your Majesty.”

“Maids? I thought it was a… Maids? Maids… could it be? I’ve heard that some countries buried maids with their dead kings to serve them in the afterlife. Is that what happened here? Or does this mean that the dark elves who left the forest made this tomb their new home?

“Regretfully, the ‘Message’ did not contain any further details, Your Majesty.”

“…I can’t figure it out at all. The forest is not a human realm, so there’s no history on it either……. well, I’d like to hope that the maids won’t be monsters like the ones that came to the capital. Tell our people to be careful.”

“It is as Your Majesty says. Judging by the strength of those emissaries, we are most likely heading into a completely unknown situation. We would be best served by caution. In addition, I hope Your Majesty will swiftly come to my side should anything unexpected come to pass.”

“By which you mean we will teleport away in case of an emergency?”

Fluder’s slight smile was an answer in the affirmative.

“If that comes to pass, then we will fight a delaying action. No matter how many enemies come at us, at the very least we will be able to buy Your Majesty some time to escape.”

Baziwood said this with a smile, but his comrade Leinas did not reply at all. Rather than an agreement which needed no words, it was a form of disapproval that was immediately visible on her face. Yet the others around her said nothing.

In the end, she had never officially sworn her loyalty to Jircniv despite her position in the Four Knights. The truth was that serving Jircniv was the most profitable course of action for her. If someone else appeared who could give her what she wanted, she would immediately abandon her current position.

In other words, her loyalty to Jircniv was the lowest among the Four Knights.

The Four Knights were selected solely on the basis of their fighting ability and not their personality or loyalty. Even so, there was nobody else whose motives were as mercenary as hers.

The only reason she was here was because one of the Four Knights had to be in the Imperial capital at all times. The one selected for that duty was “Fierce Gale”, Nimble Ark dale Anock, which was unavoidable. If “The Immovable” was still around, Nimble would be the one here instead.

“Forgive my rudeness.”

Leinas withdrew a handkerchief from a breast pocket and shifted it to the right side of her face. As it turned out, the golden cloth was actually her hair. She stuffed the handkerchief under that hair and wiped lightly.

After the brief procedure, the handkerchief turned yellow with the amount of pus it had absorbed.

“Please allow me to make my own life my top priority. I apologize if I get in your way.”

“Ahh, that’s fine, after all, that’s what we agreed to when you became one of the Four Knights — or rather, what you contracted to.”

“I see, so everyone knows what I plan to do. Then, I will do my best to squat in a corner over there and not get in your way.”

The mood in the carriage was due for a change, so everyone laughed heartily as Roune spoke.

“Then, judging by our current speed, how long until we reach Nazarick?”

Roune, whom Jircniv was addressing, withdrew a pocket watch from his breast pocket. After he confirmed the time, he turned to Leinas, watched as she nodded, and replied.

“If everything goes according to plan, in about an hour.”

“Is that so? I look forward to it. We’ll see what Ainz Ooal Gown is trying to sell us.”

Part 2

Jircniv’s carriage slowly reduced its speed, until it finally ground to a halt. However, he still could not disembark immediately. It was troublesome, but Jircniv had to attend to his own preparations for the sake of style and security.

Normally, this task would have been performed by underlings, such as the maids in the other carriages. However, they did not have the luxury of waiting for those carriages to arrive. After all, they had come to apologize, and keeping the wronged party waiting too long was a foolish move.

After Jircniv adjusted his clothes, he fastened his cape over them. This was an extremely valuable item made from a magical beast’s skin and further treated with magic. With it on, not even the coldest temperatures outside would inconvenience him.

Then, he slid the Imperial Scepter into his belt, which completed the minimum preparations for the Emperor to appear in public.

Jircniv looked himself over one more time, to make sure that his appearance would not shame himself or the Empire.

What would follow was a negotiation with Ainz Ooal Gown, though in truth it would be closer to a war of words. In other words, his formal wear was the social equivalent of a warrior’s sword and shield. The consequences of any flaws or deficiencies in his bearing would not be limited to simple embarrassment. Although it would be good if his opponent was not observant enough to pick those flaws out, he could not count on the details of his attire being overlooked.

Jircniv nodded in satisfaction, and just at that moment, a knock rang out from the door.

“Then, I shall disembark first, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll leave that to you.”

After that short answer, Baziwood opened the carriage’s door.

It was a stately, proper exit that befitted the carriage which bore the highest authority in the Baharuth Empire. Just in case, Roune interposed himself between the Emperor and the outside as the door opened, serving as a shield for Jircniv.

They could see what lay outside, beyond Baziwood.

The first thing that came into view was the grass of the plains. After that were the royal guards, lined up opposite the carriage. Beyond them lay a hill that swelled up from the plains, and what looked like a huge lattice door that seemed to have been half-buried.

Is this the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick? It seems a little different from what I've been told… well, errors like this are within acceptable ranges.

After disembarking from the carriage, Jircniv fell in step with Baziwood —who was already in formation with the royal guards— and set forth.

Jircniv took a deep breath. The enchantment on his clothing ensured that the air which entered his lungs would be fresh and clear. Granted, it was still cold, but not uncomfortably so.

As he took his breath, he worked his jaw, and quickly glanced at the subordinates around him.

Fluder, in his long robes and holding his staff, was trailed by his acolytes.

The divine magic casters, with holy symbols pinned to their vestments — they were knights in the imperial knight orders, although they were not warriors by profession.

The royal guards, who remained at their positions now counted among them the outriders who had been sent ahead of the carriages.

Personally, Jircniv wanted to see what those pioneers had seen, but right now, that was not an option.

It seemed the maids, who were in another carriage, had not arrived yet.

Well, they were gifts anyway. It's only to be expected. Then, when they said a cabin, did they mean that lattice door… or is that it?

When he looked to the left, he saw a single-story wood cabin. It seemed utterly incongruous with both the plains and the cemetery, and he smiled bitterly. After all, where had all this wood come from? The Azellerisia mountain range loomed in the distance, and he thought of the Great Forest of Tob.

Did they haul it all the way from there? I don't know how many kilometers the wood must have travelled, but it they would have needed a lot of labour to bring it all the way here.

Although he did not know much about log cabins, Jircniv did not feel that this structure was particularly eye-catching. Even so, when he took the surroundings into account, he had to admit that the fact that they had managed to build this here was impressive in and of itself.

But… that's a big door… a double door, huh? And built so high… it's three stories tall by itself. Could this place have been built as some kind of storehouse?

Jircniv looked to the cabin, with Baziwood and Leinas on his right, Fluder on his left, and Roune behind him.

"Your Majesty. Should we order the people in the other carriages to disembark as well?"

Jircniv did not turn to Roune —who was whispering in his ear— as he answered.

“No, there’s no need for that. Rather, we should—”

Jircniv’s words were cut off mid-sentence. It was not just because the cabin door opened, but because their eyes had been drawn to the two beauties who were now slowly walking out of it.

They were dressed in traditional maids’ wear — well-tailored, but otherwise unremarkable. However, the maids themselves carried themselves in an abnormally prim and proper way. Even Jircniv, who was a jaded connoisseur of beautiful women, was visibly surprised and stared unabashedly like they had grasped his very heart.

This… what a beauty… but…

They were beautiful indeed. Any noble daughter of the Empire would applaud their looks without reserve. Jircniv felt that he might even want to add them to his harem. However, this was a tomb in the middle of a grass plain. They were utterly out of place here, and as a result, an ominous feeling came over him.

He could hear the sound of a tongue clicking softly beside him, but he did not have the energy to waste on such matters.

“Say, gramps, could this be an illusion?”

“About that… well, I cannot say for sure, but I don’t think so.”

“Are they human? They don’t look like dark elves…”

“And about that… I cannot say for sure either, but I doubt they are human.”

Those answers gave Jircniv a small measure of peace. Since they were not human, it would not be strange if they appeared in a place like this.

It was an answer that he could understand and which he desperately wanted to believe.

Both maids bowed simultaneously, and the one with the bunned-up hair spoke.

“Greetings and welcome, Your Imperial Majesty Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix. My name is Yuri Alpha and I am tasked with welcoming you. Behind me is my assistant, Lupusregina Beta. Though our time together may be short, we hope you will take care of us.”

Although he delayed in responding because he was overcome by the two of them, Jircniv managed to reply in the end.

“Then, I thank you for going to all this trouble for us. Indeed, I must thank Ainz Ooal Gown-dono as well, for allowing such lovely ladies as yourselves to pass into our care. With that in mind, there is no need to address me as Emperor or use other honorifics. I will be glad if you treat me as an ordinary individual and called me Jir — nay, indeed, I hope you will do so."

Jircniv smiled brightly to Yuri.

However, even after receiving a smile that would have had any woman swooning for him, Yuri's serious expression remained as it was. Jircniv could also tell from peering at her eyes that her heart was similarly unmoved.

Was he not to her taste, or was she the type that did not mix business with pleasure? Or was she filled with loyalty to the person she served?

I can't see through her. I wanted to leave a good impression, but it seems like that'll be very difficult. And I was pretty confident that I could handle anyone if they were women… ah, if Gramps is right, then it must be because they aren't human. It's not like my charm would work on nonhuman females… still, what species do they belong to? They look like they should be humans, or at least, close to human…

He had no clue as to what they truly were.

Judging by those two dark elves and these two maids, Ainz Ooal Gown must be a man who placed great importance on appearances.

If that’s the case… if my gifts aren’t any better than those two, then I might as well have come empty-handed….

Jircniv considered the ladies-in-waiting he had brought along in the carriages. He was proud of their looks. Each of them were nobles who had been made fully aware of what would happen to their families if they disobeyed Jircniv’s commands, and they had bid teary-eyed farewells to their kin before they left and come here with determination in their hearts.

It’s meaningless. Still, after knowing that the other side already has beauties superior to them, would they rejoice because they were no longer needed? Or would they be jealous of them as fellow women? I guess I should have gotten some elves, shouldn’t I?

Jircniv had not been able to bring along slave elves from the Empire with them because there had not been enough time to prepare them, and also because he wanted to hold them in reserve as capital for future dealings. Those dealings would not be with Ainz, but with Mare.

He wanted to get his hooks into Mare, that panicky little girl, and strip her bare before him. Then they would use the dirty little secrets they could dig out of her for their own aims.

To begin with, we would get her attention with promises of emancipating her enslaved kin. In exchange, she would do some simple favours for us behind Gown’s back. After that, we could use *those incidents as blackmail material to have her do more things for us. At least, that was the plan…*

Just as Jircniv was mulling over his schemes for Mare, Yuri responded to him.

“Your Imperial Majesty is most kind to say so. However, our master Ainz Ooal Gown has explicitly ordered us not to show any rudeness or disrespect to the Emperor, and as such, I regret that we cannot accede to your generous request.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s a shame.”

Jircniv shrugged in an exaggerated manner, like he was putting on a comedy act.

“Still, please feel free to address me as intimately as you see fit. How about Gown-dono?”

“Understood. Our master is still making his preparations, and he will need a bit more time. I pray you will be patient and wait for him.”

“I see. Then, where shall we wait? Inside that cabin?”

“No. We hope you will wait here.”

Jircniv raised his head to the sky. Although it did not look like it would rain soon, it was hard to call the weather good with those dark clouds in the sky. In addition, there must be a chill in the air since it was winter, although Jircniv could not feel it through his enchanted clothes.

What is he thinking, telling us to wait here? Could it be that he wants us to know our place?

Since he had been ordered to come to the offended party’s home to apologize, Jircniv’s circumstances were already quite bad to begin with. And then, on top of that, Ainz Ooal Gown wanted to demean him further with this. Clearly, Gown had a bad personality.

“Is that so?”

Jircniv narrowed his eyes. He would take things as they came.

“Then, we shall return to our carriages and await him therein.”

Jircniv could feel the anger boiling out of his numerous royal guards as he said those words.

They might be in a neighboring country —and one which might end up being an enemy to them— but even so, letting the Emperor of a great nation wait in a place like this was far too rude.

However, nobody could vocalize these feelings. Since their liege lord had clearly accepted these terms, there was no room for them as loyal servants to say anything else.

Unless—

Was it because they saw the carnage that dark elf could wreak? If that is so… Gown, you're a hard man to deal with. With just one move you've struck fear into all our hearts. Even if that ability could only be used once a day, who would be brave enough to put that to the test? And then there's the fact that it was a child doing it. You're giving us the impression that even a child can be that powerful.

"I pray you to wait."

Yuri's clear, quiet voice cut through the air before Jircniv could move.

"Since the delay originated from our side, we would be poor hosts and in defiance of Ainz-sama's commands if we did not extend every courtesy to you in compensation."

Jircniv was somewhat surprised.

Ainz… he allows his maids to address him so directly? Maybe they're not maids… no, I see. At the very least, they're that close to each other. Has he claimed their bodies yet? No, any man would understand why. With such beauties in his employ, the difficulty would be in keeping one's hands off them.

Jircniv made his reply with exaggerated politeness, though his tone was tinged with tenderness.

"Ohhh! Then, we must be grateful to Gown-dono. Well then…

what sort of reception can we look forward to, and where can we expect to find it?”

“That being the case, permit us to begin our preparations. To begin with, the weather does not look very welcoming. Let us change that.”

“What do you… ? Uooooh!”

Jircniv was not the only one gasping in surprise. The magic casters, royal guards, Baziwood, Leinas, even Fluder, all of them could not help but exclaim in wonder.

The dark clouds above them began to move slowly.

Within moments, they had vanished without a trace, as though some invisible giant had scattered them with his hands. The hippogriff cavalry in the air were thrown into confusion, which was something those on the ground could empathize with.

“Why is it that… it feels… warmer…?”

“You too? You mean it’s really happening?”

As Jircniv heard the quiet exchanges between his guards, he shucked off his cloak and dispelled the magic which maintained the temperature of his body. Just then—

“Yo-Your Majesty!”

Roune exclaimed at Jircniv’s sudden disrobing, but the Emperor did not answer his subordinate.

“Hu… huha… huhahaha. What is this… what on earth is this? Gramps! What’s going on?!”

Jircniv abandoned his calm and looked to Fluder with a twisted expression on his face.

The refreshing, clear air which surrounded him now should only have been found in spring. The chill grasp of winter was nowhere to be found. Jircniv had never heard of magic like this during Fluder’s lessons. In that case, what kind of spell was this, anyway?

“This should not be the work of arcane magic… I seem to recall a druidic divine spell that could control the weather…”

Fluder seemed unable to control the broad smile on his face as he spoke.

“Weather control should be a 6th tier spell. However, judging by Your Majesty’s reaction, this may not be a simple manipulation of the weather. It must be a higher tier spell… how incredible…”

“And this spell is the work of that dark elf — of that emissary, then?”

Jircniv could force himself to accept that this spell was the work of that magic caster who could cause the earth to swallow his men up in its cracks. No, in truth, he hoped that was the case. He did not want to believe that there was another magic caster out there who was stronger than her. That would be a nightmare.

“Indeed, that might be the case… but I cannot be sure.”

Fluder seemed to find all this terribly amusing, which lit the embers of agitation in Jircniv’s heart.

Although his mentor was an excellent teacher who was worthy of respect, he became nearly useless once magic was involved. It was extremely irritating when he got like that.

“I believe that should have refreshed you somewhat. Then, let us begin the next phase.”

The maid ignored Jircniv’s rising panic and tossed out another bombshell at him.

The young emperor was fighting the urge to throw up his hands and give up on maintaining his dignity. The temptation to succumb to the tremors in his heart were very strong, but in the end, his obligations as the Emperor of the Baharuth Empire won out and he managed to control himself.

“Now then. Come here.”

In response to Yuri’s orders, the doors of the log house opened, and something huge stepped out.

“Kehhhh!”

A lone cry rang out. It was a strange sound that one might expect of a strangled chicken.

When they realized who had cried out, terror filled the hearts of everyone present, not just Jircniv. Indeed, it felt like they had been plunged into a waking dream.

The one who had made that uncharacteristic sound was the high court wizard of the Empire, the “Triple Magic Caster”, Fluder Paradyne. He was a man who was said to be able to rival the Thirteen Heroes. A man like that now stood with eyes wide with terror, his gaze fixed on the things emerging from the log house.

Shortly after that, several screams filled the air, all of them from Fluder’s disciples.

“How could this be?! That is—!!!”

“Un-unbelievable! This is impossible!”

“Danger! An attack is coming! Defensive magic! Please allow us to use defensive magic!”

Fluder glared at his disciples, all of whom were in full battle readiness.

“Silence!! Calm yourselves, all of you!!”

The being emerging from the log house was worthy of their caution and dread. The eyes of everyone from the entire Imperial contingent were inescapably drawn to a single point.

There was no doubt at all that it was a monster. It was a monster sheathed in black plate armor.

Its body was excessively large, and its silhouette was filled with evil. It was as though a god had drawn forth the essence of violence and brutality from all humanity, concentrated it, and given it physical form. Its rotted face had no expression, yet they could all sense a brilliant, shining hatred burning in its empty eye sockets.

And there were five of them.

The vast body of the one at their head was carrying a large stone table. The ones behind were holding various utensils and many chairs.

None of them had any hostile intent. In contrast, the vigilance and panic of Fluder’s disciples seemed almost laughable.

There was a sound of something falling to the ground.

One of Fluder’s acolytes had collapsed to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Or rather, out of the four acolytes he had brought along, almost all of them had ended up that way. Their pale faces were frozen in shock as they began hyperventilating.

“Impossible. How could this… no, no, it can’t be. Are those Death Knights? Are they being controlled? And in those numbers?”

Something flashed through Jircniv’s mind. He couldn’t help but forget himself and shout angrily.

He no longer had the luxury of preserving his dignity.

“Death Knights? What do they mean by Death Knights?! Gramps! Answer me! I’ve heard that name before, does it have anything to do with that undead creature that’s rumored to be locked up under the Ministry of Magic?!”

Indeed. It was a Death Knight. That was the name of a monster that could plunge the Empire into dire straits just by itself.

Yet, Jircniv did not receive a reply.

Fluder was staring with eyes wide open. Jircniv realized that talking to him was a waste of time and instead stormed forward with hurried, worried steps, before taking one of the acolytes by the lapels and lifting him up from the ground.

“What are these ‘Death Knights’?! Answer me!!”

“Aieeee! Your, Your Majesty! As you said, that legendary undead monster sealed within the nether reaches of the Ministry of Magic is, indeed, a Death Knight! They are creatures that even Master cannot control!”

All Jircniv could do was laugh. The reserve that he had clung to as the Emperor of the Baharuth Empire was no more. It had crumbled to ash and blown away on the wind.

“…hu, huhu. Huhuhu. What do you mean, legendary undead?! There’s five of them right there in front of us! Or are you saying that Death Knights come in groups and five of them count as one entity? Huh?! Are you kidding me?!!”

“N-no! Nothing like that!”

He sensed someone standing beside him. When he glanced over, he saw that it was one of the Empire’s strongest warriors, Baziwood. The man’s face was pale, and Jircniv could see a nervous tic starting to form.

“Er, ah, Your Majesty. Please listen to this with a calm heart. The situation now is very bad. That creature is of a level that we, even in formed ranks and with full magical support, might not be able to overcome. Perhaps it would be a good idea to sound a retreat. This is bad. Really bad. Look at how my hand trembles.”

As Jircniv looked over to Baziwood’s hand, it began to shake. After looking at his twitching face, the reason for that unwarrior-like movement became abundantly clear.

“Is that what they mean by ‘unfathomable’… do you think it could be stronger than Stronoff-san?”

The other member of the Four Knights was further behind than when she had started out, and she was still continuing her slow retreat. The only reason why she had not broken into an all-out sprint was because she did not want to attract the Death Knight’s attention and thus, its hostility.

This whole thing felt like a nightmare come to life.

And then, before them…

The way the Death Knights were calmly arranging the furniture and utensils on the grassy plains was the very picture of the loyal manservant. There was nothing in their actions which suggested that they were legendary undead which could destroy a country.

However, it was a fact that they were undead which even Jircniv’s strongest magic caster, Fluder Paradyne, could not command. Anyone could tell that by looking at the reactions of everyone present.

This implied that there might be more than five of these monsters, whose fighting ability was far in excess of Fluder’s own.

In contrast, Fluder Paradyne himself was a magic caster that might well have the combat power of the entire Imperial Army. Of course, he did not have infinite mana, and in a straight fight, the Army should be able to take him out. However, if he used his teleportation or flight magic, he might well be able to exterminate the entire Imperial Army by himself. That was Fluder's true power.

That would mean that the five Death Knights here represented five times the fighting strength of the entire Imperial Army.

Impossible.

It could not be allowed to happen.

This was far too much power for a single man to possess. Even a country would be hard-pressed to contain this much might. This was the sort of power which only a few famous nations or republics of legend could command. Could the master of a meager little tomb really possess such puissance?

When the two dark elves emerged, he forced his mind away from that topic and focused on what was before him.

“Ainz Ooal Gown… a monster we can't do anything to, no, that we can't even touch…”

Jircniv’s heart was like a tiny boat tossed around in a raging storm.

In the end, however, he wrestled his emotions down and regained his calm with his iron will.

His royal guards, annihilated. The shadow of the dragon’s vast body. Since he had already accepted these in the past, he could allow himself to accept what lay before him now.

Without these prior experiences to cushion the blow, the impact on him would have been greater. He might have shown an even more disgraceful side of himself.

This tomb is… How powerful is Ainz Ooal Gown? Those five Death Knights and those two. Even with that dragon included, that can’t be all, can it? Why is he hiding in this place? When did he start taking up residence here? Or perhaps his preparations are finally complete? I’ve heard that when many undead creatures gather in one place, an even more powerful undead being is born. That’s why these Death Knights… no, could it be even more powerful than these Death Knights…? Not good. There’s no time, but I still have to think of a way…

As Jircniv’s high-speed thought processes drove him ever further into confusion, Yuri cut in.

“Do not be afraid. These Death Knights were created by Ainz-sama himself. They are absolutely obedient to his orders, and in his place, I have gained the right to command them. I will not permit any of you to come to harm."

Yuri's words shattered the thoughts which Jircniv had tried to piece together like spun glass.

"He created them…"

Ainz Ooal Gown could birth these beings through the sheer force of his own will. That was the awful truth. The fact was that making such creatures would require resources and effort equal to their immense power. The nightmare was that either he could meet those criteria, or bypass them entirely.

No, this must be a bluff. How could anyone make things like that? He must be lying to inflate his own prowess. Because if he's not—

A strange smile appeared on Jircniv's face.

For some reason, everything seemed so bothersome now.

—Ah. I'm done with this. I don't know anything anymore. This time, let's just settle for seeing what the other side can do, yes.

"Fu, fuhahahahaha!"

Just as Jircniv decided to abandon all delusions of control, a laugh of sheerest joy rang out from beside him.

It came from Fluder.

Be they royal guards, acolytes or priests, the faces of everyone except Jircniv were frozen in shock.

Fluder Paradyne was a magic caster of the highest order, and a hero possessed of incomparable education and knowledge besides. Countless entries in the history books of the Empire told of how he single-handedly engaged monsters which threatened the safety of the nation, and emerged triumphant. His saintly demeanor also meant he was honored and respected by many people.

In truth, many of the people here felt the same way about him.

And now, Fluder was laughing in a way that shattered the mental image that everyone had of him.
There was power in that laugh.

The aura of a hero.

There was no doubt that Fluder was radiating a fearsome pressure, and not the warm feeling that Jircniv sometimes got from the man who was as close to him as his father.

He possessed immense magical might, enough to take on all the Four Knights at once. And his voice took on a demented tone as he seemed to be going insane.

It was only natural that the nearby royal guards would break out in goosebumps.

Amidst all this, only the people from Nazarick and Jircniv kept their cool.

“…to control Death Knights, and in such numbers! Marvellous! Marvellous!! Marvellous!!! Fuhahahaha!”

A single tear oozed from the corner of his eye, and he smiled as though his face were broken.

—No, that wasn’t right.

This was the true nature of a man who had abandoned his position as a wizard of the Imperial court to glimpse the deepest mysteries of the abyss called “magic.”

Until now, it had been hidden under the mask of a hero, but in the face of a mighty magic caster, it could not help but surface.

“Well then, Your Majesty. What shall we do now? Should we flee with teleportation magic? I think if we teleported now, we should be able to make it, right? Assuming the terrain allows for it…”

Fluder said this to Jircniv, a mocking smile on his face,

“I like that face of yours, Gramps. Then, let me ask a question in turn. Do you think I will run?”

Cracks spread rapidly throughout Fluder’s face. That was the smile of a madman, which instilled incalculable terror in all who saw it.

“As expected of his Majesty, no, my darling Jir. My pupils, open your eyes and be grateful for the fact that you can lay your eyes upon the highest, the most exalted of all magic casters on the mainland. Now that you have seen the end of your journey, you must work towards it!”

The faces of Fluder’s disciples and the royal guards turned paler and paler as they realized the kind of person whose home they had visited.

They knew their comrades had been massacred by Ainz. However, the legendary magic caster from their history books had called him “the most exalted of all magic casters.” It felt like a huge stone had been lodged in their bellies.

“Your Majesty, this is bad, right?”

“…Do you mind if I run first?”

Baziwood seemed confused, and Leinas’ question was filled with despair.

Jircniv looked at them.

Fluder and his disciples aside, the tension of the royal guards was slowly increasing, and they looked like they might break at any moment.

This was because Fluder’s abnormal behavior and the description of the Death Knights’ power had shattered their morale.

“What else can we do? And if you want to run, go ahead. However, if you do that, they might think you’re not one of us. Which means that to them, you’ll be an intruder. You’ll be lucky if you don’t end up like those workers who came here earlier.”

Leinas ground her teeth and her face twisted.

“Which means it’s fine, right?”

“Baziwood, look at Gramps— no, Fluder. He’s the most familiar of all of us with magic and he’s like that now. All we can do is leave everything to our hosts.”

“What about praying that God will give us luck, and then escaping?”

“Do you really think we can escape?”

Baziwood glanced at the maid, who had clearly overheard them talking about fleeing, but calmly continued their preparations anyway.

“What if we took a hostage?”

“I don’t like to hear people talking about doing impossible things, ‘Lightning Bolt’, see what happens if you say that again.”

“…Forgive me. In truth, I feel that the maid is even more powerful than the Death Knights. They’re certainly more mysterious… ah, look at her, she doesn’t even care that we’re talking about such things right in front of her. How frightening…”

The maid was monstrously strong as well.

As he thought about this, Jircniv shook his head. He desperately wanted to believe that was not true. As he thought about it, he tried his best to put the cold smiles of those two dark elves out of his mind.

“Looks like we are almost… are we ready, then? In that case, everyone, I hope you will relax over here.”

There were many tables and chairs in place on the grass. The tables were covered in pure white tablecloths and large sun umbrellas provided shade. The Death Knights who had been moving the furniture into place were standing by beside the log house in order not to get in the way.

“We have also prepared refreshments for you.”

Wine bottles were arrayed on the tables, filled with an orange liquid. Beside them were high-stemmed wine glasses made of clear crystal. Each of them was intricately carved with elaborate designs.

Even Jircniv, an Emperor who enjoyed the best things in life on a daily basis, could not help but stare with eyes agape at the display before him.

“Please let us know if you need anything else. Then, everyone—”

The log house’s door opened once more, and more maids filed out from within. The Imperial contingent took in their transcendent beauty, which was enough to wipe away all the fear and unease they had experienced until now.

Each of them was uniquely beautiful in their own way. One of them had hair that was pinned up into two buns, another had long, straight hair, and a third had drill-shaped hair.

“Are they having a sale on beauties?”

Although Jircniv didn’t know which of the royal guards said that, he had to agree. After all, what would such belles be doing in a tomb?

Does that tomb mass-produce beautiful women? Do they pop out of the ground like mushrooms?

He heard the sound of a tongue clicking again, but paid it no heed.

“Then, please enjoy the drinks we have—”

“—Ah, before that, could we meet Ainz Ooal Gown-sama first? I would like to expedite matters… and if it’s all right, could I speak with him just before he meets with Jir—”

“Fluder, contain yourself.”

No matter what, none of them could disgrace themselves or the Empire here.

“Don’t forget your position, Fluder. We’re here as representatives of the Empire, not to satisfy your thirst for magical knowledge.”

By this time, a calm light filled Fluder’s eyes. He had, for the most part, managed to subdue his rampant desire.

“…Forgive me, Your Majesty. I was overcome by excitement. I beg the forgiveness of everyone else present as well.”

“That’s right, Gramps. Have a drink, calm yourself down. Then, shall we?”

“Understood.”

Yuri slowly filled the glasses on the table before Jircniv with that same orange fluid. A fragrant citrus scent wafted through the air.

Jircniv took a mouthful of the juice, and the taste was such that he could not help but smile. He thought bitterly, ‘what have I been drinking all my life’. The surrounding royal guards murmured in surprise as they partook of the drinks. If even the jaded Jircniv could be surprised like this, how much more so these common men? As if to illustrate that point, there were many who had forgotten etiquette and were gulping the juice down as fast as possible.

Shortly after, shocked exclamations rang out from the gathered men.

“It’s delicious!”

“What’s with this juice, it’s a perfect blend of sweet and sour flavor!”

“It glides down your throat, and there’s no cloying aftertaste!”

Jircniv took another drink as he heard the praise from all around him. Suddenly, he felt like he was filled with power.

Even my body is getting excited from this taste, huh. To think that Nazarick could produce such quality beverages. It seems I did insult those two dark elves back then. If they availed themselves of such wondrous drink every day, then it’s no wonder they weren’t impressed by our side.

Jircniv smiled bitterly.

To think, even a simple taste of this could defeat them so utterly.

Ahhh… I feel so calm now. This is the first time I’ve felt this relaxed since I came here. It’s like… like I’ve come home…

How long had they stayed out of the sun in the shade of the umbrellas and heard the wind blow through the grass? Eventually, Yuri said the words which Jircniv longed to hear.

“I apologize for the delay. Ainz-sama is ready to see you now, so please follow me.”

Part 3

Jircniv arrived at a hemispherical room that looked like a theater. He stood at a pair of vast double doors. Intricate carvings decorated both sides of the doors; beautiful goddesses on the right and cruel-looking demons on the left. Countless ominous-looking statues were arrayed around them.

It made onlookers think of “The Gates of Judgement.”

Jircniv pondered the gates as he looked over them.

The huge room, was quiet, so quiet that he imagined he could hear the metaphorical ‘sound of silence’.

Indeed, nobody from the Imperial contingent had uttered a single word ever since they had been brought here. The only sounds were those of armor scraping against armor.

Before they came to this hall of silence, they had passed through vistas filled with incomparable sights on the way here, and their souls had been stolen away by the wonders they had witnessed.

It would have been too much to expect them to not be entranced by the mythical sights they had seen.

In truth, even Jircniv found it hard to control the impulse to gawk openly at his surroundings, given the fantastic world they had passed through.

He glanced over his shoulder to look at his subordinates who had followed him here.

Behind him were Baziwood and ten specially-selected royal guards, Fluder and four of his acolytes, Roune, his secretary, and the priests from the knight orders. Leinas and the other royal guards had been left behind with the carriages for security.

Everyone following him —with the exception of Fluder— had drawn in their shoulders.

This was the result of being constantly reminded of how tiny and insignificant they were, as well as witnessing sights that the artistic elites of the Empire would have trouble replicating.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick was a tomb in name only. In truth, it was a beautiful world that was closer to a divine realm than anything else. Their impression of the ruler of this place, the magic caster Ainz Ooal Gown, was almost indescribable.

The smile on Jircniv’s face was filled with mockery, aimed at himself. Humans would naturally bow their heads to those who exceeded them. Anyone that was unimpressed by these architectural and artistic marvels must surely have the aesthetic sense of a pebble.

…*This is quite disturbing.*

Ainz Ooal Gown waited beyond that door. He was a magic caster whose power surpassed even that of Fluder Paradyne. Indeed, there might be nobody to equal him in the past or the future. His magnificent domicile far exceeded the capacity of humans to imagine, and his followers possessed incredible power. He was a being who possessed every advantage that Jircniv could think of.

Why would someone like that be hiding in a place like this? Although Jircniv did not know the answer, he would probably find out soon enough.

At least, he hoped to achieve that much during the discussions that were to follow.

I doubt he'll be satisfied with a simple apology after that spectacular show of force he put on.

Initially, Jircniv's plan was to determine Ainz Ooal Gown's desires and then meet them in order to gain benefits for the Empire. This whole pretence of making an apology was merely an excuse for achieving that aim.

However—

As if I could begin to meet the desires of someone as powerful as this.

I couldn’t do it, even if I had more wealth and power than I already do.

Just as a one-carat gem would not gain Jircniv’s attention, Ainz Ooal Gown could not possibly be interested in anything Jircniv could offer.

To begin with, wealth would be completely out of the question.

As for providing military and magical support — well, why would he be interested in things that were far inferior to his own?

Even using members of the opposite sex as honeytraps would be impossible. Jircniv was firmly reminded of that as he thought of Yuri and the other maids.

Offers of rank and authority would be useless, for someone who lived in a place like this.

Jircniv wondered if human desires could move the heart of Ainz Ooal Gown.

“…It would be very difficult, huh.”

Jircniv’s mind ran through countless stratagems and ploys to use against Ainz Ooal Gown.

The conclusion was that he could not overcome him.

The best outcome he could hope for was that Ainz would not regard him as an enemy.

The victory conditions for this engagement are: the Empire remains intact, and that I return alive.

As he gave voice to these thoughts, Jircniv found that they were louder than he imagined. However, nobody around him reacted. They were too mesmerized by their surroundings.

“This is the throne room. Ainz-sama waits for you within.”

After that, Yuri announced that her part was over, and bowed deeply to Jircniv.

As though waiting for those words, the vast double doors swung slowly open of their own accord.

Several sudden intakes of breath reached Jircniv’s ears. It was not just one or two instances, but over ten of them, probably well over half the people who had come to this place. Many among them had not been able to fully muster their resolve and allowed their desire to flee to show on their faces. In other words, many of the Imperial contingent had been hoping that those double doors would not open.

It was precisely because of that reason that Jircniv was grateful that the doors opened automatically. Who knew how long they would have to wait if they needed to work up the courage to pass through those doors first?

The ceiling that came into view was very high and very broad. The walls were predominantly white, with extensive gold decorations and highlights.

Multicolored chandeliers —made of precious stones from all the colors of the rainbow— were suspended from the ceiling, radiating an eerie light. Flags hung from poles set into the walls.

Jircniv and the others blanched pale as an oppressive air swept over them from inside the room.

A crimson carpet ran down the center of the room, and flanking it were a series of immeasurably potent beings.

Demons, dragons, bizarre humanoids, armored knights, bipedal insects and elves. Each was different from the other, but the one thing they had in common was the overwhelming power each of them possessed. Such beings were arranged in two lines on either side of the carpet, and it felt too disheartening to count them.

They watched Jircniv and company in silence. Although it was said that one could sense a certain kind of strength in the eyes of those with power or status, this was the first time Jircniv had ever felt a physical force pressing on him when he met someone’s gaze.

The sound of low moans and the shuddering of metal armor plates came from behind Jircniv.

It was proof that his subjects were scared out of their wits.

However, Jircniv did not intend to reproach his subordinates for showing their fear. Rather, he wanted to praise them, because every single one of them had conquered that fear and stayed behind him.

They had remained steadfast in the face of this primal terror from the dawn of humanity.

Jircniv’s threat evaluation of Ainz Ooal Gown rose by several dozen notches at once. He had been on guard up till now, and that assessment of Ainz’ power had been revised ever upward since he arrived here. But even that had been far too naïve.

The matter of dealing with Ainz Ooal Gown was no longer simply a matter of the survival of the Empire, but rather, it concerned the survival of the entire human race — even demi-humans.

Jircniv’s eyes followed the carpet forward.

Before them was a set of stairs, and around it were assembled people that Jircniv surmised were Ainz’ aides. A beautiful silver-haired girl. A bluish-white monster that looked like an upright insect. A toad-like man in a suit. The twins from before — here Jircniv felt some relief. If it turned out that the ones who wiped out his royal guards in a few seconds were mere foot soldiers, that would hardly be a laughing matter.

Above them, upon those stairs, was a beautiful winged woman, and just behind her—

“That is…”

Upon a crystal throne sat the personification of death. It had a strange-looking staff in hand.

It was a monster with a skull for a head.

It was like a being that had been formed from concentrating darkness into a single point.

It was Ainz Ooal Gown.

A magnificent crown sat upon his head, and his body was cloaked in a luxurious sable robe. Rings glittered brightly on his fingers. Even from such a distance, Jircniv could clearly tell that the exquisite accessories which Ainz wore were beyond the skills of his Empire’s artisans.

Blood-red points of light glowed within the empty eye sockets of Ainz Ooal Gown’s skull. As they swept over Jircniv’ and his contingent, it felt as if they were tasting him.

He was shocked by the fact that Ainz was not human, and at the same time he was relieved.

It was because Ainz was not human that Jircniv could honestly accept that Ainz was a superior being that was far out of his league.

“Hu…”

Jircniv exhaled quietly.

It was a sign of his resolve.

The door had been opened, but it had not been opened for long. It was certainly not long enough for anyone to comment on their inactivity. Still, they could not wait out here forever. And so, Jircniv took a step forward.

“Let’s go.”

Jircniv’s words were quiet enough that only those behind him could hear them. Anyone who saw him would be surprised by how he could speak without opening his mouth. This was not magic, but pure skill. It was a skill that was particularly useful in this sort of setting.

However, Jircniv could not sense anyone responding to his words.

Advancing to Ainz Ooal Gown’s feet meant that they would have to pass between the flanking lines of monsters. Even though he was certain that these frightening foes would not attack them, walking in front of these creatures would still require a great deal of courage.

His judgement that they would not be attacked was not just his one-sided optimism.

The reasons for using a throne room like this were usually to provide a formal setting for official communication, as well as displaying national power. These were facts that anyone would know.

Which meant that the reasons for choosing this place were to display the power of Nazarick, and to show that he had no intent of killing Jircniv and his followers. After all, if Ainz wanted to get rid of them, he could simply have brought them to a slaughterhouse instead.

Jircniv’s underlings should have clearly understood that fact. However, that was not the reason why they remained immobile.

That reason was simply because they did not want to go near Ainz.

Beyond the lines of monsters were Ainz Ooal Gown’s aides. The power of those beings was clearly beyond the reckoning of sane men.

And upon the throne was Ainz Ooal Gown himself.

At great length, Jircniv realised something in the depths of his soul.

He realised that they were standing in the presence of what men would call a god.

Jircniv possessed a magic item that defended against mental attacks, but the pressure he was facing was outside the scope of the item's protection. If he lost his focus but once, even the man known as the Blood Emperor would be able to do nothing but kneel before Ainz.

Still, it was precisely because of that reason that he had to go.

Just as Jircniv was observing Ainz Ooal Gown, Ainz Ooal Gown was also observing Jircniv. If he disapproved of what he saw, what would happen to the Empire in future? At the very least, he had to let Ainz recognize the value of Jircniv, and by extension, the continued existence of the Empire.

Jircniv laughed at his own naïveté.

What had he been thinking by 'a war of words'.

I guess this is what it means to regret something. Nothing else matters anymore. All I can hope for is to minimize the damage to the Empire.

"Let's go!"

Jircniv’s stern command was directed at his subordinates, but more importantly at himself, in order to snap himself back to reality. He could sense his followers looking at him expectantly.

It was a very soft carpet, but to Jircniv right now, it seemed far too light and ephemeral.

He firmly shunted aside the innumerable glares directed at him and moved forward, keeping his eyes fixed on the person that lay before him — Ainz Ooal Gown. His instincts were telling him that if he averted his gaze for a moment, he would no longer be able to move.

Jircniv was not an excellent warrior or anything like that, but the reason why he could move forward at the head of his men where his royal guard feared to tread was because of the mental fortitude that had been bred into him as an Emperor.

At last, he reached the base of the steps, in front of Ainz’ close aides.

“Ainz-sama, this is the ruler of the Baharuth Empire, Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix, for your viewing pleasure.”

The sweet voice came from the winged woman standing beside the throne. Her dulcet tones matched her radiant looks.

In response, the being that was a veritable god of death spoke to Jircniv.

“I am glad you have come, Emperor of the Baharuth Empire. I am the master of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

A faint pang of relief ran through Jircniv. His voice was more normal than he expected — like that of a human being.

If that was the case, reading him from his words might yet be possible.

“I humbly thank you for your most generous welcome, Ainz Ooal Gown-dono.”

One could not read facial expressions from a skull. What sort of greeting would best fit the current situation? Jircniv carefully pondered that question.

However, the one who spoke first was neither Jircniv, nor Ainz.

“Ainz-sama. It is disrespectful for inferior beings such as humans to address yourself as an equal,” a man’s voice said.

“「Kneel」.”

Jircniv heard the sound of innumerable metal plates clanking, but he did not need to turn around to know what was going on. His subjects must have knelt in response to the man’s voice. At the same time he could hear the desperate grinding of teeth that came from those who wanted to rise, but could not.

It must have been some sort of powerful mental domination effect.

Had Jircniv not worn the necklace he never took off, he would be kneeling like his men.

Countless gazes affixed themselves on Jircniv, the only one to remain standing. They were cold, clinical stares, as though Jircniv were nothing more than a guinea pig.

“—That’s enough, Demiurge.”

“Understood!”

The toad-like monster called Demiurge bowed respectfully to its master.

“「Releasing control」.”

He could almost see the pressure around them disappear, and he could hear sighs of relief from behind him.

“…Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix, my subordinate has done something rude to a noble guest who has come from far away to visit my domain. The sins of the vassal are those of the liege, and as such I beg your forgiveness. I hope this is a matter which can be resolved with a bowing of the head.”

Commotion and activity rose from the two files of monsters behind them.

Countless feelings danced up in Jircniv’s heart.

He was cautious, because he realized that Ainz was not the type who handled matters solely with brute force. Clearly, he was a cunning person, and had to be watched carefully.

Similarly, he was relieved, because Ainz was not the type who handled matters solely with brute force. At least, he did not seem like someone who would wipe Jircniv out without bothering with negotiations.

Most importantly, he was afraid. He knew without a doubt that Ainz had the complete loyalty of all the monsters present here.

At the same time, Jircniv had the sickening realization that everything that had happened so far had occurred in accordance to Ainz Ooal Gown’s wishes. It was the ominous feeling that everything had taken place just as Ainz had planned.

“There is no need to apologize for that, Gown-dono. It is not uncommon for subordinates to act as they please from time to time. Citizens from our Empire have done the same themselves. *That*, I must apologize for."

One of the royal guards who had been released from the domination began moving, and placed an urn beside Jircniv in a worried, panicky manner. Jircniv should have immediately taken it up, but he was delayed by his thoughts.

Were the actions of Gown's minion intended to make me say what I just did? If that's the case, should I go off-script? No, that's not an option. This is like a staged fight with real blades. A single misstep will result in severe injuries… that would be very bad.

"This is the head of the foolish noble who took action on his own to intrude upon your tomb… although I do not know if 'tomb' is the right word to use. Please accept it."

The urn contained Earl Femel's head. He was the noble who had been induced by Jircniv to recruit and dispatch the workers.

These nobles who were neither boon nor bane were raised to be used at times like these.

Dead men told no tales. Although he did not know how much information Ainz Ooal Gown possessed, it would be wiser to silence him to prevent further leaks.

It was quite likely that Ainz sent his emissaries because the workers had barged into his domain, and he wanted their master to take responsibility for it. Because of that, he had to deny all knowledge of the incident in the hopes of improving their relationship.

The beautiful woman standing beside Ainz gently nodded her head, and the one called Demiurge brought the urn up the steps.

Then, he knelt before Ainz, and presented the head from within the urn,

Ainz lifted the head up.

“I will accept it. But what shall I do with it now? It would be a waste to simply throw it away.”

…*Hm? Ah, mockery, then? I see. He’s only certain that the workers were hired by Femel… the question now is where the information leaked from…*

Suddenly, the severed head of Earl Femel twitched in the skeletal hand that held it.

At a glance, one might think that Ainz was the one moving it, but a closer look would reveal the truth. The head was covered by some sort of liquid, and Ainz released it from his hand.

Just as it was obscured by the sudden change in position, a fountain of sticky black liquid erupted from the ground.

After the black fluid finished dripping, what was left was an enormous suit of black plate armor.

It was a Death Knight.

As one, everyone behind Jircniv inhaled sharply in surprise.

“How… could this…”

He created it. The maid’s words were true. Jircniv desperately wanted to bite his lip but forced himself not to. He could not do such a shameful thing in public.

“Go. Get in line.”

With a deep groan that seemed to come from somewhere far beneath the earth, the Death Knight obediently descended the stairs and vanished from Jircniv’s field of vision.

How many more of these Death Knights can Ainz Ooal Gown still make? Don’t tell me… an unlimited number, as long as he has corpses? But, if he could do that — wait, before that, can he make even more powerful undead? That would mean…

“Then, Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix-dono.”

Ainz’ quiet voice let Jircniv find himself again, and he smiled easily to Ainz.

“Ah, Gown-dono, Jircniv will do. After all, it is a long name.”

“Is it now? Well then, Jircniv-dono. To begin with, allow me to apologize for that unsightly behavior just now. Given that my ill-mannered vassal was rude towards you and those under your command, I will consider the matter of that noble’s invasion of Nazarick settled. Then, that is all. Although I have made you come a long way, you are now free to leave.”

“—Hah?”

Nobody could understand what was going on.

“Ah, forgive me. I fear I may have misheard your words. Could you speak them to me once more?”

“There is no need for you to apologize. It will be fine if you return home. After all, we will be getting very busy over here shortly.”

Ainz shrugged, like he had been kidding.

Jircniv had no idea what was going on any longer.

Could it be that the apology was just a pretext to get him to come here in order to fulfil some other objective? That clearly seemed to be the case, but the circumstances seemed far too strange to be explained away like this.

Something wasn’t adding up here.

—Wait a minute? What did he just say?

“Forgive me, but what did you mean by ‘getting very busy’?”

“Thanks to this incident, we now know that we will be drawn into troublesome matters even if we try to remain uninvolved. That being the case, I was thinking that we should move to the surface and begin taking care of those matters ourselves.”

“That, that would mean…”

“First, we will have those fools who tried to harm us pay an appropriate price. After that, we will crush all the troublesome people we encounter until the peace I so cherish is restored.”

These words were the ranting of a lunatic.

No — that would be wrong. He was not mad. When one considered Ainz Ooal Gown’s personal, military and economic strength, those words were not mad at all. It was only Jircniv — blinded by his limited experience — who found it hard to accept the facts.

Ainz Ooal Gown was a man who could do what he said.

An uncontrollable feeling of dread welled up from beneath Jircniv’s feet.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick. What was supposed to have been a sleeping giant had been roused, and it was about to begin a reign of terror on the surface world.

Could it be that he called me here for this? Is this a declaration of war? What should I do? Ainz Ooal Gown is essentially declaring war on the Empire! Should I kneel before him for here the sake of the future?

In truth, that might have been the wisest thing to do.

However — there would be no pleasant fate in store for them if they accepted a monster's rule. There was a possibility that Ainz might simply kill everyone in the Empire and reanimate them as more Death Knights. It might be a more agonizing fate than simple death.

Jircniv racked his brains like he had never done before in his life. By right, he should have brought this question back and consulted with dozens of sages over what the proper course of action should be. But by then, it would be too late.

With a smile that cut through everything, Jircniv spoke.

“I have a proposal. How about forming an alliance?”

“Are you confusing us with your lackeys— uwah!”

There was a clear, bell-like voice, followed by the sound of something moving swiftly. The silver-haired girl frowned, while Aura, standing beside her, pretended to act dumb.

Although Jircniv's dynamic vision was not good enough to see what had happened, it looked like the dark elf had just kicked the silver-haired girl in the leg.

"…Oi, you—"

"—You're making too much noise. Quiet down."

Like a demon king, Ainz majestically waved his left hand to motion for silence.

Such regal movements could only have been born of long years of ruling over this domain.

Jircniv's alertness level went through the roof.

I see, he has presided over this land for a long time. To think he had such a dignified bearing…

The two girls' voices overlapped, expressing their regret for their foolishness.

He could not sense a hint of the arrogance that Aura had given off while in the capital. Right after that, he glanced at Ainz Ooal Gown, hoping that he had his subordinates fully under control. Then he screwed up his courage and prepared to speak.

This was the main event.

His tongue flickered over his lips.

Jircniv picked the finest plan he could think of from the numberless plots and stratagems he had come up with until this day.

“To build a nation here and to rule it — I think that is a great idea. It is a position that best fits Gown-dono. Our nation will gladly supply all the aid and resources you need to found this nation. How about that?”

Ainz’ fleshless face did not move. However, Jircniv sensed that the bright points of red light in Ainz’ eye sockets were glowing slightly brighter.

“…Jircniv-dono, I do not believe that plan holds any merits for you.”

That was only natural, which was why he could confidently predict Ainz would ask that question. Mustering up all his acting expertise, Jircniv made his reply.

“I wish to forge good relations with the country that your esteemed person will eventually establish. This is also a consideration for the future.”

“I see. Then, let it be so. I will leave the details to you.”

Jircniv was left speechless at the speed with which Ainz had agreed to the proposal. He had not expected that at all. He could not even muster up the will to say anything else.

To begin with…

Why didn’t he ask me to swear loyalty to him? As an overwhelmingly superior individual in an infinitely advantageous position, why would he even accept an offer of alliance?

He had prepared dozens of answers for when Ainz demanded fealty from him. But Ainz’ answer had exceeded the scope of Jircniv’s predictions.

What was he up to?

Jircniv could not understand Ainz’ thinking at all.

When battling a stronger opponent, a weaker man would consider how to turn his opponent’s strength against himself and trip him up. This was how one exploited the arrogance of the strong. But if the stronger opponent was not an arrogant being, then that tactic was unusable. The weaker man’s only way of fighting would have no effect.

Ainz must have been thinking that way. He would never act in an arrogant way that let others exploit him.

No…

It’s possible that everything up till now has been going according to Ainz’ plans. After all, the delay in his replies was far too short. Did that mean he already predicted all my possible choices and prepared the appropriate responses?

Jircniv was keenly aware that the terror that accompanied Ainz Ooal Gown did not stem merely from his matchless might, but also from his unfathomable intellect.

“Is, is that so. Then, that is wonderful. Could, could you tell us if there is anything we can do for you?”

“I cannot think of anything right now. For now, how about setting up places where we could send each other’s ambassadors to visit? Like embassies, perhaps. I would like to have a means of contacting you, honoured Emperor.”

If all was really going as Ainz planned, then there was no way he would not have thought of everything. Therefore, the meaning behind his words were obvious.

These words must be a ploy as well. He must have thought that if he stated his demands immediately, he would be seen through. This monster sure has a lot of schemes. Or rather… perhaps it’s because he’s a monster that his intellect surpasses that of humanity.

“Ah, yes, indeed. How foolish of me for not having thought of that. As expected of Gown-dono.”

“…Ah.”

Is he not a fan of pleasantries?

After hearing that half-hearted response, Jircniv made a mental note of that data point.

“Then, I shall return first. I will leave my secretary here. Could you discuss the details with him? His name is Roune Varmilinen.”

“—Understood! On behalf of the Empire I shall devote my body and soul to you!”

Although Jircniv could not see Roune’s face, he could hear a strong conviction in his voice. In truth, the decisions made here would decide the Empire’s future. If he did not have to rush back to the Empire immediately to form the appropriate committees and carry out the necessary planning in order to accommodate Ainz Ooal Gown, Jircniv would have preferred to stay here himself.

“An excellent answer. I can feel your loyalty to your Emperor in every word. Then, we will send out Demiurge. Since he was disrespectful to you earlier, consider it an apology for his prior rudeness.”

The frog-like monster bowed silently from the corner of Jircniv’s eye, and he sensed that he was about to lose a valuable subordinate. He struggled to control himself so he would not direct a hateful glance at Ainz by accident.

He checkmated me right from the start!

The frog monster Demiurge could control minds with his words. There was no doubt that he would use them to brainwash Roune and have him reveal everything he knew about the Empire.

These are not the actions an ally would take. Still, the fact that he would be so overt about this is proof of his insidious nature. Demiurge… he must be planning to send this stupid-looking monster to do such intelligence-intensive work so he can blame any problems on the actions of his subordinate. Ainz Ooal Gown, how many more tricks do you have up your sleeve? Damn you!

Although he was cursing and swearing at Ainz in his heart, Jircniv had to acknowledge his skills.

His earlier misstep was a calculated move to stop us from complaining later. We have to speak up now if we have any qualms about this. If we don’t, he might assume that we have no issues with this in future.

Just as Jircniv was about to say something, Ainz spoke before him.

“Demiurge is one of my most trusted followers. I am sure there will be no further problems if he and Roune discuss matters.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Jircniv forced himself to smile.

This was the first time he had seen such a masterful exploitation of an opportunity. Since he had already said this much, anything further would be a waste of breath.

However, as Jircniv heard Ainz’ next words, he realized how naïve he had been.

“Now then, the situation is different. Now, Jircniv-dono is an ally of Nazarick. To send you home in such haste seems rude. Since you are here, why not spend the night? Think of it as a welcome.”

So it’s not just Roune, he wants to get everyone here as well?!

Worse, he might be planning an even more wicked scheme. No matter what, it was hard to believe this was an innocent act of charity with no ulterior motives. He cursed the twisted face of Demiurge as he replied “Understood” from the bottom of his heart.

“No, no, no, we could not possibly trouble you. After all, we must return to make preparations.”

“Is that so? That is a shame. Then, if it is convenient— no, please allow one of my servants to send you home.”

Jircniv imagined himself riding a dragon, and curiosity welled up at Ainz’ suggestion. Still, Jircniv shouldered that prospect aside. There was no way Ainz would simply transport him home, and he did not wish to owe Ainz a favor.

“I am deeply appreciative of Gown-dono’s most generous offer and I thank you for it. However, I feel that since I came on a carriage, I should return the same way.”

“An undead headless horse could run day and night without sleep—”

“—Please forgive me, but I must respectfully decline.”

“Must you? I see.”

He could sense that there was some disappointment in those words. Was it an act, or was it the truth? Jircniv could not tell, although he suspected it might be an act.

In any case, as long as they did not fully understand their current circumstances, he wanted to avoid announcing the news of the Empire’s alliance with the undead Ainz.

To begin with, if he rode an undead horse that hated the living back to the Empire, leaving aside the priests that he brought with him, what would the priests of the capital’s temples have to say about that?

“Then, permit me to return to my domain.”

“Very well. Demiurge… escort our guests outside.”

“No, no, there is no need to trouble… well, since this is a rare opportunity, how about the maids? I have never seen such beautiful women before.”

Ainz cricked his neck in surprise.

—It was an incredibly fake movement.

Jircniv fought to keep his anger under control as he smiled to Ainz.

He knows we’re on guard against Demiurge but he’s still provoking us like this!

There was no intention of forming an alliance here. It was a roundabout way of telling Jircniv exactly who was in charge here.

I’ve never seen such evil before… he’s a threat to humanity’s continued survival…

“Ah, thank you for that. Then, please speak with the maids waiting outside. Ah, what a fine day for forging an alliance. How I wish I could make it a feast day!”

You mean, to celebrate the day you made slaves of us?!

As he screamed internally, Jircniv smiled to Ainz once more.

“Indeed. Yes… Indeed.”

Part 4

After the talks were concluded, Ainz gathered the Guardians in his room — Albedo, Demiurge, Aura, Mare, Cocytus, Shalltear, and Sebas.

He signaled to his kneeling subordinates to rise.

He placed both elbows on his table and meshed his hands, covering the lower half of his face.

His nonexistent belly ached. Now was the time for the review. As he held that feeling in his heart, he peeked at Demiurge and Albedo.

They did not seem angry. Nor did they seem speechless.

However, who could tell if that was or was not a poker face? After thinking of that, he looked closely at them again, to see if their faces were frozen in anger.

I want to get out of here. In the first place, why did I sit here… no, it’s too late. Words said can’t be unspoken. Grow a damn spine, Ainz Ooal Gown!

With that, the phantom pain in his gut seemed to have subsided, but he still felt like throwing up.

When he learned the Emperor was approaching Nazarick as planned, Ainz could not help but indirectly ask Demiurge “Then, what will we do next”, but instead the answer he got was “Since all is going as predicted, we shall stick to the plan.”

But I don’t know what the plan is!

Of course, he did not actually say that.

As the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz had to adopt an attitude that matched the expectations of the NPCs. To him, they were like his guild members’ children, who had been placed into his care. Therefore, he put his all into making a good impression on them, even when all he had to do was resolutely nod and answer “is that so” in a kingly way.

When it came to Demiurge’s plan, however, Ainz was desperately flailing in the dark.

The actual talks with Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix had been played entirely off the cuff, trusting that there would be a way through no matter what. As for how confident he was of having said the right thing during the negotiations… well, simply put, he had no confidence at all.

Like a student waiting for his test scores, he peeked at the two of them.

This is like a job interview…

When he had just started working, he remembered having a similar feeling to this.

“Then, as planned, the Emperor has made his move.”

Ainz took a deep breath. Just as he was about to speak, a voice interrupted from beside him.

“Ainz-sama, I fear to ask, but I have a question. Why did you have to give the emperor of the humans a place as a collaborator? Couldn’t we have just conquered the Empire by force?”

In response to Shalltear’s question, Ainz’ non-existent heart skipped a beat.

In order to conquer the world, they would first apply pressure to the Empire. Because of that, they would allow the Empire to launch an attack on Nazarick, and use that to threaten the Empire and force the Emperor into direct talks. Then, they would demonstrate the overwhelming power of Nazarick. That was how this operation should have gone.

That was all Ainz knew. The exact importance of why they had to impress Nazarick’s power onto the Emperor was a mystery to him.

Because of that, he had no idea how to properly answer Shalltear’s question.

Aura continued after her.

“Shalltear is right. We went to their capital and it’s nothing much.”

Ainz glanced at the other Guardians. They all seemed to feel the same way.

Even if they had no intention of going against the decision made by Ainz, their master, even if they thought it was the right way, the doubts would still keep welling up.

In addition, they wanted to know why Ainz made the decisions that he did, to understand his true intentions, so they could serve him more effectively.

If they did not know his motives, then the chances of them accidentally working against his aims would be higher. In particular, two of the Guardians felt uneasy about this lack of knowledge, namely Shalltear and Sebas, who had already committed mistakes in the past. Both of them watched Ainz with eager faces, ears pricked up so they would not miss a single word of Ainz’ answer.

Ainz suppressed the stress he felt from being the focus of everyone’s attention, and searched for a way out of this predicament.

First, I need to decide whether or not to affirm or deny Shalltear and Aura’s words. If I affirm them, that means conquering the Empire is *part of the plan. If I deny them, it means we won’t be conquering the Empire for now… but which side are Demiurge and Albedo hoping for? Oh no, not good, I took too long…*

With a cold smile on his face, Ainz laughed.

He took a deep breath.

The odds were one in two.

If he screwed up here, all he would have to do was change the course somehow. And besides—

Shalltear is always messing up, so I should reject her in this!

“—I feel that would be a foolish course of action, Shalltear."

The light in the Guardians’ eyes brightened as they heard Ainz' words. That was probably not a mistake. After hearing the words of their great master, they might be able to gain some wisdom from that erudite mind of his.

I’m not what you think I am!

Ainz looked over to Demiurge. In order not to be mistaken as a full-fledged cry for help, he began softly and carefully.

“…Demiurge.”

A smart man like him should understand even if I just speak his name. That was Ainz’ hope.

“Yes! Please forgive this incompetent vassal’s inability to fully comprehend your long-term plans!”

“Ah, no, no, incompetent is a bit too much…”

“Once more, I offer my apologies! I beg for your forgiveness!”

“…Ah, ahhh…”

It’s not like that! Why, why didn’t you explain for me? This is bad, if I call on Demiurge again… why didn’t he just answer directly?!

“…Albedo.”

“I am moved to tears by the boundless compassion of Ainz-sama. As expected of our ruler, and our king.”

“…UmuMm.”

He wanted answers more than he wanted praise.

However, there was already nobody else he could turn to.

After gathering his resolve, Ainz began explaining his conclusion.

“We require just cause.”

“Is. Such. A. Thing. Truly. Necessary?”

“Of course. Indeed, we could conquer the Empire with force alone. However, if we did that, we would raise too many enemies against us. It is different from dealing with primitive opponents like the lizardmen. If I had to explain it, I would phrase it like this: ‘While we were living peacefully in our secluded home, we were attacked and robbed by workers from the Empire. In anger, we killed them and sought to apologise to their employer, the Empire, and they in turn said they would help us build a nation in order to make amends.’ That was the general idea. We will make the Emperor one of our collaborators in our plan.”

“Oh, I see~ But Ainz-sama, will they accept it just like that?”

“Whether they accept or not is immaterial, Aura. The truth does not need their approval.”

That was what he meant by “just cause”. And Ainz had not told a single lie to them.

“Ah, does, does that mean, it was all for this? To, uh, to get the Emperor here?”

“Hm? What do you mean, Mare?”

“Y-yes. Er, talks, talks with the Emperor might leave traces behind, and because of that, you specially brought him here to minimize the amount of leaks when you spoke. I, I think that’s it.”

“—Hahaha. Indeed, it was. Well done, Mare.”

Mare blushed shyly, and smiled.

As he looked at Mare’s adorable smile, Ainz sighed in relief. It was true, negotiating in the Empire might leave a lot of evidence behind. However, by bringing a limited amount of Empire personnel here, they could minimize the number of leaks and ensure it would not go on the record. This would be useful if investigations were made.

Ainz was impressed by the foresight of Demiurge, who had arranged for events to take place here in the first place, and looked to the other Guardians.

“In addition, building a nation implies that we will be defending more people. Turning countries into graveyards will only damage the name of Ainz Ooal Gown. Now, has anyone noticed anything?”

The intention behind those words was to ask if anyone else had noticed anything special, like Mare did.

The eyes of all the Guardians were now focused on Demiurge. They must have felt that Demiurge, whom they believed was the brightest mind in Nazarick, would surely have picked up on something. Ainz strongly hoped that would be the case.

“—Kukukuku”

Demiurge’s laugh echoed through the room.

"…Did you really think that was the extent of Ainz-sama's plan?"

"Kuhuhu…"

"U-Uhm…??"

"Ehh?"

"What do you mean?"

"What. Did. You. Say?"

"…Hm?"

"Everyone, you need to think harder. Do you truly know so little about our master, the hub around which all the Supreme Beings revolved?"

Ainz swallowed and blinked, as though he had been punched in the face. Meanwhile, the Guardians were nodding and murmuring "Indeed".

The hell, why are you making things difficult for me!

Fortunately, nobody could hear Ainz' internal monologue.

"Really now, did you think you could divine Ainz-sama's true intentions with just a simple answer? You are all too hasty, is that not why Ainz-sama did not immediately explain everything to you?”

All the Guardians besides Albedo and Demiurge were starting to look a little uneasy. It was probably because they were unsure about whether they could serve effectively with their current brainpower.

All this made Ainz even more grateful for his current body. It was easier to maintain a poker face this way.

“Really… Ainz-sama. I believe it is now time to inform us of your true objective. After all, our future efforts will all be dedicated to achieving it.”

Everyone’s attention went to Ainz. Their earnest, pleading expressions seemed to say, “Please enlighten this foolish one”.

After looking over everyone, Ainz took a deep breath. No, he took several deep breaths.

Then, he slowly rose from his chair, and turned his back to the Guardians. From this position, he offered praise to Demiurge.

“…As expected of Demiurge, and the Overseer of the Guardians, Albedo. To think, you could discern my true aims…”

“…No, Ainz-sama’s schemes are elaborate and farsighted. I cannot hope to compare. And I believe what I understand is only a portion of your plans.”

Demiurge bowed respectfully in response to Ainz' praise.

“I have heard that some of the maids speak of you as a Wise King. I believe that name is best suited for Ainz-sama. To think, assuming the role of Momon the adventurer was part of your master plan. Now he has become an effective alternative to leveling a country.”

Ainz nodded in smug self-satisfaction, but his heart was a vortex of doubt.

…*What’s he saying? Momon? What is the name of that adventurer from E-Rantel doing here?*

“What does this all mean?”

Shalltear’s question carried a hint of jealousy, it was probably because only two people could think on the same level as her beloved master. As she saw Demiurge’s faint smile and Albedo’s beaming victor’s smile, Aura could not help but puff up her cheeks.

“Ainz-sama, tell us too. We want to be useful as well!”

“Th-then, um, uh, please tell us!”

“To. Begin. With. We. Should. Not. Need. To. Have. It. Spelled.

Out. For Us. Please. Forgive. This. Foolish One.”

“I pray you will enlighten us in this matter, Ainz-sama.”

Ainz kept his back faced to them, and covered his face with a hand. The stress made him feel like he was going to faint.

—There is no greater joy in life for us than to serve you.

The Guardians behind him were saying something similar, all at the same time.

Ainz could not help but feel his heart ache with guilt as he heard the Guardians lament behind him. His emotions should have been suppressed, but the pain he felt was uncontrollable.

Should he come clean and admit his own incompetence?

Ainz' myriad doubts and speculations would not allow him to say that.

He cast aside his doubts and turned around, thrusting the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown forward as he did.

“Demiurge. I permit you to explain what you understand to the others.”

“Understood.”

After Demiurge nodded, he began speaking to his comrades.

Part 5

The structure of the carriages had not changed between the journey to and from Nazarick, but for some reason, every slight bump and movement along the way seemed magnified. The reason was probably because of the gloomy atmosphere in the carriage’s interior. Or it might be because of the change in the composition of the carriage’s occupants.

The troops escorting them to Nazarick were composed of men from the First Legion. The ones escorting them from Nazarick were from the Second Legion.

In place of Fluder was one of his acolytes. In place of Roune was one of his scribes. The two original occupants of the carriage who remained were Jircniv and Baziwood.

Fluder was not here because he wanted to discuss what he had seen with his disciples. In his stead, he had sent one of his acolytes to take his place in Jircniv’s carriage. Though the acolyte was skilled, he was still a far cry from his master.

In all likelihood, the discussion in Fluder’s carriage was probably at a feverish intensity.

The mood in their carriage would probably be the polar opposite of this one. In Jircniv’s carriage, there was only silence.

The grim mood continued pervading through the carriage.

The one who had made it this way was Jircniv himself. His face was hard, and his expression bitter, like he had chewed on a lotus root.

The man who was known and feared as the Blood Emperor was a man who typically wore a cold smile on his face. In truth, that expression was carefully rehearsed. This was because he had to cultivate the impression of a strong emperor among his people. If a person who stood above all others could not make a striking impression on everyone, it would cause unease among those who followed him.

However, it seemed that even these three people, who knew Jircniv the best, had never seen this look on Jircniv’s face. Everyone present knew this, which was why they kept quiet and remained in their places.

Even if he felt them looking at him, Jircniv did not plan to say anything.

The reason for that was abundantly clear.

Or rather, if anyone could think of anything else, Jircniv would split open that person’s head to see what was inside. Chances are, he would find a brain the size of his pinky finger.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick… In truth, calling it a tomb was grossly inappropriate.

That’s a demon king’s castle!

Those frightening beings, and beyond them—

—The spectre of Death, which sat upon a throne.

And it was not just fear they felt.

They had seen myriad luxuries, glittering architecture, and all manner of decorations. Nobody could remain unawed by that.

Jircniv could easily predict the difficulties his country would have, in the face of that being which possessed superlative military and economic power, among other things.

If a country’s leader was strong, he would give his people a sense of security. However strong a country might be nobody could feel confident if it were led by a sheep. Fortunately, the Empire was a lion through and through. And then, all of a sudden, a dragon had appeared before them. How would the Empire’s citizens feel about that?

Jircniv stared down at his hands, which were clenched so tight all the color had gone from them.

No, it’s not over yet. There hasn’t been a decisive defeat yet.

Jircniv smiled. It was a smile that fit the name of the Blood Emperor.

Perhaps they were waiting for the return of that cold smile, but a feeling of relief came over each of his subordinates. Jircniv could not help but smile genuinely as he saw this.

“Don’t stare so hard. Aren’t you losing your focus here?”

“Your Majesty!”

The three voices overlapped. There were hints of joy within them, joy that their Emperor had come back to them. As Jircniv realized what he should be doing, he nodded vigorously.

“To begin with, I would like to confirm if everyone is feeling conflicted about that place. If anyone has a differing opinion, feel free to give it. Who knows, I might be the one who’s gotten things wrong. Well then… I suppose we should start with the most important thing— What does everyone think of the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown?”

Jircniv deliberately said the name of that super-class monster a beat slower than normal.

“Ainz Ooal Gown is a monster among monsters who can easily create Death Knights, and if we make an enemy of him, the Empire may well be destroyed. However, even if we do not antagonize him, there is a chance he might kill us all anyway, because he is undead and he would take joy in it. Does anyone disagree?

“No.”

“It is as His Majesty says.”

“Ahh, we agree, then. While we’re at it, I do not believe humanity can defeat that being. Frankly speaking, I do not think we can gather enough blades to face him, even if we mustered all the armies of the Empire.”

After receiving three similar replies, Jircniv continued speaking.

“In addition, I can sense that as an absolute ruler, he has the charisma that befits a king.”

“Ah, yes, his presence was truly formidable. It felt like he was more of a leader than our Emperor.”

“Baziwood-dono!”

“It is fine. That is a fact. The frightening thing is that he said just one sentence, and from that sentence I could feel the immense pressure of a tyrant.”

“‘You’re making too much noise. Quiet down.’ Was that it?”

Jircniv nodded lightly to the scribe.

That was without doubt the attitude which Ainz Ooal Gown adopted as the king of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

“Also… the scariest thing about that monster is the way he thinks. He’s a rare breed of schemer whose every move is made with a purpose… don’t look so surprised, you lot. Think about it. He’s probably predicted the flow of everything we have discussed so far. Otherwise, why would he release us so easily? An opponent with so much power, who doesn’t use brawn, but brains? He is no mere mindless brute.”

That was the most troublesome part about him.

“After that, let us talk about his followers. What do you think of them?”

This time, he pushed his subordinates for their opinions.

“The ones near him must have been his close aides. And the black-winged woman beside him… she should be his queen, right? It seemed that way, from her attitude.”

The jaw-dropping beauty in the white dress.

Even if the smile on her face was not a wholesome one, it still possessed a charm that would set people’s hearts ablaze. In the face of her beauty, there would be many men who would be consumed by their desires and long to see that smile directed at them.

As for the black wings at her waist, one could tell they were not magic items or items of clothing. The main reason was because they were far too natural. Although she looked like a winged human and there were tribes of humans with wings, she should probably be a demon, an outsider to this world, Jircniv thought.

“She might well be. Could she be Ainz Ooal Gown’s wife? If she’s his wife, then, how about his… never mind. Though, if he’s a skeleton, then he should only have bones for a body. Or was he wearing a mask? Who knows?”

Still, although Jircniv said that, none of them felt that it was a mask, and it was probably not an illusion either.

“And there’s also Demiurge, who can control people with his voice… is he a bard? Frogs look like they could sing.”

Bards had the ability to use the power of music and song to produce magical effects. The power of Demiurge to control people through words was very similar to that.

In addition, he had also heard that the fey creatures called Lorelei had an ability similar to his. However, that man was nothing like the beautiful beings that were the fey. He was absolutely certain of that.

“Ah, I see. A bard, then? That does sound quite similar. And there was a gigantic insect as well, I believe. What was that?”

“Although I think it could be some sort of insect-type species… I don’t know much about ant-men, so I think you would be better served asking Master about it.”

The world was huge. There were many species that were not widely known, and some of them could spontaneously mutate. Also, according to the legends, monster kings were known to be more developed than normal. It was similar to how ant queens were different from normal ants. Jircniv thought that it was a possibility.

“In that case, the remaining ones are the silver-haired girl and those two dark elves. Leaving the latter two aside, who’s the former? Judging from her ample bosom — could she be a concubine?”

Laughter filled the carriage at Baziwood’s comment.

“Ah, well, if she was just a concubine, then she wouldn’t be brought out like that, no?”

“She’s probably as strong as that dark elf.”

“Hey, hey, hey… That might just be a ruse.”

Baziwood’s words were infused with seriousness.

“It’s true, in all likelihood the ones closest to that monster Ainz were probably his aides. However, that doesn’t mean they’re all strong. Think about it. If the only criterion to be His Majesty’s follower was strength, and he surrounded himself with a hundred copies of me, don’t you think the government would crumble in short order? Simply put, she was chosen to be his follower for reasons other than strength. Perhaps she's a very intelligent concubine? Maybe she singlehandedly manages the affairs of that fortress which calls itself a tomb."

"I see," came the scattered replies.

Jircniv could confidently agree with that.

Since their attention had been stolen by Ainz Ooal Gown's might, they could only look at how she was lined up with the dark elves and conclude that the silver-haired girl was a strong being. Of course, it would be scary if another person had the same power as that dark elf. However, being led into a false conclusion by prior prejudice was also a bad thing.

"That's a good point," Jircniv said as he looked at his subordinates. "I share your opinions. Come to think of it, if all his followers were undead, that would be easy to explain… but from the looks of things, he's gathered all sorts of monsters under him."

"Well, rather than call it a monster gallery, you could say it's a wealth of talent…"

Jircniv could not help but smile at Baziwood's blunt words.

"Indeed. We should probably try and learn more about these fellows. Apart from that… there's the matter of that fortress. Is there anything in the records about a place like that? There should be something written about it, right?”

“Regretfully, I know nothing about it. When we return to the capital, I will immediately begin looking into it. I will begin with myths and legends.”

Jircniv graciously accepted the acolyte’s apology.

“Ahh, I’ll leave that to you. Is there anything else we’ve missed? I honestly can’t believe such a wicked monster could create such a wondrous domain. Did you find anything which could be a clue? Speaking of which, is there really a tomb based in this area?”

There was no answer.

Which meant that this was a question they all had.

It felt like they had teleported, the way they had gone from one place — possibly another plane of existence called the Demon World — to the base of the tomb. It was hard to discount that fact, or rather, maybe that explanation would be easier to stomach.

“We won’t get an answer. As I thought, we just don’t have enough information. All we can do is squeeze out as much as we can from Roune, who’s stationed over there, and from the fellow who’s coming over to the Empire. Do you understand?”

“Of course. We will try not to arouse hostility in the opposition, or make them suspicious."

"There is no try here. The enemy's strength is overwhelmingly superior to our own. You need to move carefully so you don't break the false alliance we have."

As the scribe lowered his head, Jircniv suddenly felt the weight sliding off his shoulders.

"…We've done a bad thing to the people we brought along, haven't we?"

That was why he had only just now started to mention the girls who had not been released ever since they had been packed into the carriages.

Originally, the girls were to be offered to Ainz Ooal Gown in order to tie him to the Empire.

Sex was a universal weapon in any place or era. Perhaps the Imperial intelligence agencies should have prepared professional honeytraps, but since the use of magic could potentially complicate things, they had instead selected pure, innocent girls instead.

"Although I think this is disrespectful to the courage they gathered up to bid farewell to their family, don't you think they should be happy now?"

"Maybe? Being able to gain that monster's love is a pretty impressive thing.”

“A woman who would gladly make love to such a monster would be very brave.”

Although Baziwood shook his head and said no such people existed, that was a naïve way of thinking. Jircniv could attest to that, being thoroughly familiar with the secret battles that women fought, with his mother poisoning her own husband as an example.

“Women are braver than men think, and they act for passion and gain. There should be no shortage of women out there who are willing to offer their bodies to that skeleton king. In that sense, we’re the ones who should be happy now. After all, one of them might tell Ainz Ooal Gown that we threatened to kill her and her family.”

Although the only response to his words were bitter smiles, Jircniv believed that might actually happen.

Jircniv’s revolution, pushed through with autocratic power and force of arms, had made him a lot of enemies in the nobles he had displaced. Of course, there were some people who approved, but in truth, the people he could really trust were only a few of his close aides and his mentor, Fluder—

Suddenly, a question struck him like a falling feather.

It was about Fluder.

Not only was Fluder his mentor, but he was also a pillar of the Empire and its trump card. He was a man that even Jircniv revered as the highest hero of the Empire. Jircniv was keenly aware that beneath his sage-like face was a near-fanatical desire to explore the depths of magic. It was because of that desire that he had his doubts.

—It was too out of character for Fluder.

Ainz Ooal Gown was a great magic caster that far surpassed Fluder. He could effortlessly create the Death Knights that Fluder could not even control. Then, why had he said nothing and left the tomb with him?

If it were Gramps, he would probably beg that wicked monster for magical knowledge, right? He would genuflect before him and offer everything—

That was a very practical way of thinking.

Everyone had knelt before Demiurge back then. However, it might have just been a distraction to focus their attention on that bizarre situation while he used the opportunity to perform some sort of mind control on Fluder.

He could not imagine Ainz Ooal Gown wanting to take Fluder as a minion. Although Fluder was the Empire’s trump card, when compared to that monster’s power, he was little more than a speck of dust.

However, Fluder’s accumulated knowledge was valuable in and of itself. In addition, if he could take control of Fluder, the Empire’s military power would plummet, and they would lose their finest weapon against Ainz Ooal Gown.

It would be like putting a collar on a slave.

Is this what they’re aiming at? What else is there? Gramps didn’t give any reasons… was it because he already knew? Did he know about Ainz Ooal Gown’s power beforehand?

—In that moment, shock ran through him like a lightning strike.

His sweat flowed like a river.

“You Majesty? Your Majesty? Are you alright? Shall we call a priest—”

“…N-no. No need for that.”

“Eh?”

“I said, there is no need. That’s right… no need.”

Jircniv glanced at his panicked subordinates, and he was once more consumed in a maelstrom of contemplation.

Am I afraid? Me?

His mind was a chaotic mess, and he couldn’t link one thought to another. Or rather, it was more like he didn’t want to link those thoughts together and deliberately avoided them.

No! If I run away from this now, it will only invite disaster upon us! Calm down. I have to calm down. I have to calm down and think.

As his minions’ curious looks focused on him, Jircniv continued to ponder the question.

For starters, let’s consider Gramps. Assuming Gramps already knew about Ainz Ooal Gown’s power… no, if he did know about his power, then his weird actions could be easily explained. So Gramps has some kind of deal going on with that monster — impossible! Unless…

Jircniv did not have the luxury to worry about the shocked looks on his subordinate’s faces.

No, that’s not right, Jircniv. When Gramps saw the Death Knight, that fear on his face was genuine. Which is proof that he didn’t know about Ainz Ooal Gown’s power… or not. Maybe, what Gra… Fluder was not aware of, was that fellow’s ability to control Death Knights. He probably knew about Ainz Ooal Gown —that incredible magic caster— from the beginning.

It was like putting the pieces of a jigsaw together, to reveal a beautiful —or horrifying— picture.

So, Fluder knows that monster. From how long ago were they in *cahoots? From the beginning? That’s right. Fluder was involved with every step of this mess, from the discovery of the tomb to the dispatch of the workers.*

He had finally made a connection between all the scattered pieces of the puzzle.

When one thought about it that way, most of the mysteries could be brought to light.

“Treachery, is it? Treachery. He’s sold us out.”

The words were spoken like a bitter grudge… or perhaps, like a child crying.

Jircniv slowly turned back to his subordinates. They knew they were not permitted to ask questions, and thus remained silent.

“Fluder Paradyne has betrayed us all. That being the case, what damage will this do to the Empire? Can we put him in a sinecure and place him under house arrest?”

Everyone could not help but stare at that unbelievable statement.

“How, how is that possible, Your Majesty? This is too much for a joke.”

Uncontrollable anger burned in Jircniv as the acolyte spoke. He wanted to shout, “That’s not what I want to hear” but he held his tongue. The reason he could do that was also because a young Jircniv was saying in his head that he didn’t want to accept those words either.

Jircniv had grown up watching the brutal politics of the dark side of noble society. With that, the adult Jircniv took a deep breath and exhaled the blazing heat in his chest and the burning emotions in his heart.

“I will say this one more time. Fluder Paradyne has betrayed us. That being the case, what damage will this do to the Empire?”

His subordinates looked at each other, and after a few seconds of this, the acolyte spoke.

“It is difficult to imagine. The amount of damage cannot be estimated with a single glance. With master around, we could be confident of overcoming any other country. We have been able to remain uninvolved with the petty politics of other nations thus far because of that.”

He looked at the scribe, seeking approval. The scribe turned pale and nodded.

“If he knows he’s been found out and sequestered, he may start taking more open action.”

“Don’t we have an intelligence agency for this sort of thing? Ah, I see. Fluder’s experience was extensive, and he shared it with us.”

“It is as you say, Your Majesty. Master truly—”

“—The possibility is shockingly high.”

Jircniv’s words overwhelmed and cut off the secretary’s.

“…But if that is the case, then we will have an incredible amount of work to do. First, let us decide who Fluder’s successor will be. Are there any suitable candidates?”

The flames of desire burned bright in the acolyte’s eyes as he heard those words, and Jircniv could not help but smile internally.

The position of being Fluder’s successor as the Imperial Court Wizard was a mouth-watering temptation. After all, it was a position that gave one the right to administer and manage arcane magic casters throughout the Empire.

Because the position had always been filled by that great hero, nobody else could claim it. Even if one had the ambition for it, their opponent was far too strong to overcome by wicked means. And now, this hitherto sealed-off position had been offered to him.

Greed is good. Desire drives progress. I approve of that sort of desire. However, I should probably ask, just in case.

“However, one must bear in mind that as the Imperial Court

Wizard, one may be called upon to do battle with that monster.”

The flames of the acolyte’s ambition went out in that instant. He could not even bring himself to be excited about it. The position he had longed for became one he wished to avoid more than anything else in the world.

He would have a better chance of surviving a jump off a five hundred meter tall cliff into a shoal of rocks than he would in spell battle against Ainz Ooal Gown.

No, he might be better off dying right here.

As the acolyte thought about that prospect, a new look came into his eyes. It was the look of a frightened mouse which had been cornered by a predator.

The hopes in Jircniv’s heart died. He could tell that this man did not have the courage to take on Ainz Ooal Gown. Or rather, he should never have expected that in the first place.

“Yes! In that case, I know some people who could use 4th tier of magic; how about selecting one of them? Granted, I do know some spells of that tier, but I am not very skilled in their use.”

“Aren’t you the most skilled of the acolytes?”

“How, how could that be? There are many more excellent than I. When we return, I shall furnish their names to you immediately!”

It was only obvious that a man would want to give up everything when asked to fight a super-class monster like that. However, what he needed was a man who would not lose his fighting spirit even in that event.

…*That won’t work, huh. It would be naïve to think he’s a special case. It would probably be better to consider that anyone who knows of Ainz Ooal Gown won’t have the courage to fight him. That means I’ll have to hand that task to people who haven’t met that being yet. Perhaps these ignorant folk will be driven by desire and struggle even more desperately against him.*

He had been dealt a bad hand of cards. However, he had no choice but to play them.

“…I see. Then, gather information on them and then conduct interviews. After that, we’ll want to have our intelligence people ready to deal with that fellow. However, we still need to help Ainz Ooal Gown, so for the time being, we’ll have to be his obedient dogs, in order to build good relations with him.”

“Understood.”

‘His obedient dogs.’ Nobody objected to that turn of phrase. How could anyone who had seen the Great Tomb of Nazarick do so?

“Then, Your Majesty. How long will we wag for that monster? Will our children have to roll over when he commands it? Our grandchildren?”

Jircniv looked around himself, in order to make sure that no spies had made their way into the carriage and checked that the door was shut tight. With all that done, and with no further problems apparent to him, Jircniv began explaining his strategy to fight Ainz Ooal Gown.

“We —and by ‘we’ I mean the Empire, the Kingdom, the Theocracy, the Republic, the Holy Kingdom and other countries— will come together in an alliance. It will be a grand alliance, aimed at defeating Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to Jircniv.

“What’s there to be surprised about? No single nation can defeat that monster. Then, all we can hope for is to bring all the neighboring countries into a grand alliance so we can turn the tide.”

“Are, are we really going to fight him?”

“Yes.”

Jircniv’s reply was simple and curt.

“Rather, if we do not fight, we have no chance of survival.”

“Then why are we helping that monster found a country?!”

“Because that is the first step in the formation of this grand alliance.”

Jircniv looked at everyone.

“Are you listening? Good. We are currently on the outskirts of E-Rantel, which is a strategic location at the borders of the Empire, the Kingdom, and the Theocracy. If that monster Gown wants to found a nation there, he will be making enemies of all three of those nations.”

Jircniv took a breath, and continued.

“And another thing. Gown is undead. I doubt he will treat humans —the living— with anything approaching decency. The people will not suffer the rule of an undead king either. There will be rebellion, which will promptly be stamped out by that monster. The Kingdom will not be happy about yielding land to him either, and I doubt the Theocracy, the strongest nation in the vicinity, will do nothing.”

“But! But, Your Majesty! If the Empire helps him in his endeavours, surely we will be seen as collaborators, right? The nearby nations will be on guard against us, right? That grand alliance you speak of will not count the Empire among them! And even if they beat that monster, we’ll be next, or worse, they might target us first!”

Huhu, Jircniv smirked.

“We will work behind the scenes. We need to let the other countries know that the Empire is secretly plotting against Gown’s nation. It’ll be difficult, but it’s also the only way.”

“Will they really believe us? If it were me, I would think it was a trap.”

“Then, we will have to convince them by showing them Ainz Ooal Gown’s strength. If only there was a way we could show the other nations his awesome power… no matter what, we need to ensure things develop in that direction. For example, letting him show his power on the battlefield.”

“Couldn’t the Empire just not help Gown build his nation, and feign ignorance of everything?”

Jircniv glared at the scribe as though he were retarded.

“At the very least, we need to secure the safety of the nation before we can engage in cloak and dagger business. If Gown destroys the Empire, what do you plan to do after running to the Kingdom?”

Jircniv was merely choosing the lesser of two evils.

“In addition to everything I’ve already said, the Empire will be pretending to aid that monster while secretly forming an alliance against him. That is to say, if we’re exposed, there’s a good chance we will be the first country that monster crushes. Or rather, he will use us as a live sacrifice to frighten all the neighboring countries into submission. Have no doubts about that.”

“Ah — if it was Your Majesty I’m sure you would go through with that.”

“…I’ll take that as praise and accept it. Because of that, we cannot be the ones to propose that grand alliance. We need to let other countries make the first move. What we should do is gather as much information about Nazarick as we can, as well as find someone who can defeat Gown.”

“Do people like that really exist?”

Given the casual tone with which it was said, nobody would have believed those words came from the acolyte. Gown was an unimaginably powerful opponent, who might be unbeatable even by the mightiest dragons. He was an opponent that made people think that way.

And to that, Jircniv issued a confident reply.

“Indeed, they do.”

“People like that really exist?!”

“Don’t they? Look within that throne room.”

When he put it that way, it seemed obvious enough.

The monsters arrayed with Ainz. Aura. Mare. The silver haired girl. The insect. Demiurge. He was referring to them.

“…Do you plan to induce a revolt?”

“Although I don’t think that may be possible, we should still prepare for it, just in case. We need to prepare wealth, prestige, members of the opposite sex and so on to make us seem at least a little bit attractive to them.”

“It will be very dangerous, right?”

“Ahh, indeed, it will be. Ainz Ooal Gown styles himself as a tyrant. With a master like that, surely they will jump at the chance to betray him, won’t they? However, even if that is the case, we have to take action. This is not just a conflict between nations anymore.”

Jircniv looked at the three of them with a resolute expression on his face.

“What comes after this will be a battle for the survival of humanity as a species. It will be a fight for the future. Devote your hearts and souls to it.”

Part 6

“…And so, I think the Emperor will try to put a scheme like that into practice. If he were more foolish, his actions might fall outside the predicted range, but I think the chances of that will be low. Reading the movements of a slightly-above-average intellect that imagines himself a genius is easier than trying to predict the actions of a complete moron.”

Demiurge raised a finger while he said that.

“In other words, the Emperor will try to form an alliance in order to defeat us — to defeat Ainz-sama, right?”

“Mmm, he’s surprisingly stupid.”

“T-then, s-shouldn’t we take the initiative and w-wipe him out first?”

Mare followed up after Shalltear and Aura, but there was no anger in his voice. It was more like he was deciding whether or not to pick up a rock he found along the side of the road.

“More important than this problem is—”

Sebas wanted to speak, but someone else had already anticipated what he was going to say.

“—Is the fact that he actually thinks we would betray Ainz-sama, is that it?”

“Really. Sebas. It. Seems. The. Emperor. Does. Not. Know. The. Meaning. Of. Loyalty.”

Mocking laughter filled the room.

Did he really think they would betray Ainz, one of the 41 Supreme Beings who made them?

Although this was nothing more than Demiurge’s hypothesis, it was enough to upset the Guardians. A cold light gleamed in their eyes.

“Welp, I’m not as mad as Mare, but I’m still pretty mad. Shall we kill them all?”

Shalltear laughed as she saw Aura in a black mood.

“I’ll turn him into a vampire. After all, if he’s good enough, there’s no reason he can’t serve in Nazarick.”

Although Cocytus had remained silent, his large mandibles made a dangerous clacking sound.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you do remember that we are in the presence of Ainz-sama?”

As they heard Sebas’ cold, clear voice, Aura, Shalltear’s and Cocytus’ anger vanished like mist in the wind.

“Kuhu — Mm. That’s right, everyone, please calm down. Please recall what Demiurge just said. All of this has been arranged. What can we enjoy if not the antics of this clown? Instead, we should be grateful — because all of this is nothing more than a part of Ainz-sama’s master plan. Right, Ainz-sama?”

Hooh… Ainz-sama’s plan, huh. I see. A special plan concocted by someone with the same name as me. Making the Baharuth Empire ally with and struggle against Nazarick was part of that plan too, huh… I have no idea what that’s all about. If only I could ask this Ainz fellow about it!

However, running away from reality like this would not change anything.

Honestly, Ainz wanted to ask about the details of the plan, and what about Ainz that Demiurge and Albedo were imagining.

However, he could not do that.

Ainz turned his line of sight toward Albedo.

There, he saw a woman looking back at him, a thin strand of dewy liquid connecting her half-open lips to the golden web of her dress. Her eyes were wet with fascination and her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink.

It was because she believed that everything was proceeding as planned, because she was so overcome by her master’s insight, that she was reacting like this.

As such, Ainz could no longer deny them. Who could say “What?” when the mood was like this?

With regard to Albedo’s question, there was only one answer Ainz could give.

“I-Indeed. That is so.”

He wanted to praise his voice for not wavering.

“Ohhh,” the Guardians chorused in respect.

“—Kuhuhuhu~”

Albedo spread her arms, and with them, her wings at her waist opened up as well.

“Ainz-sama wishes to take over a human city peacefully, and rule the region with love and compassion. Yet, the Baharuth Empire has decided to form a vile conspiracy against this paradise on earth. In the near future, Ainz-sama will show these countries the true meaning of kindness. Is that not the cause that he seeks?”

“How I look forward to that day. Everything rests in the palm of Ainz-sama’s hand. When that moron finds out, I wonder what sort of face will he make… after all, Ainz-sama always thinks several moves ahead.”

As Demiurge delivered his reverent speech, Albedo continued with a suitably respectful expression on her face.

“Indeed, Ainz-sama’s wisdom is beyond our ability to match. If Ainz-sama had not created the hero Momon, it would be impossible to rule peacefully. In that case, E-Rantel could only be controlled by violence and terror.”

“…Perhaps we could use the Golden Princess to achieve similar effects, but that would be a waste of a trump card. She is a human being who is just as interesting —no, perhaps even more so— than what I have determined from analysis of Sebas’ intelligence reports. She will be an excellent pawn.”

“Ah, after hearing that, I too wish to take a look at her.”

“Then, after we found our nation, shall we have her be an envoy to us? After all, bargains must be kept.”

“…You. Two. Have. Gone. Off. Topic. You. Are. Wasting. Ainz-sama’s. Precious. Time.”

Ainz responded with a simple “It’s fine” to their hurried apologies.

In truth, he had learned a lot from their casual conversation, and he had gained time to think of more excuses. To Ainz, that had been a valuable opportunity.

“But truth to be told, Ainz-sama is really amazing,” Shalltear said.

“Mhm. Yup yup, Shalltear. After all, Ainz-sama prepared a plan that managed to astound even Albedo and Demiurge…”

“A-as expected of. Ainz-sama. Y-you’re too cool. I-I really admire you.”

“…My. Foolish. Self. Is. Ashamed. Of. My. Lack. Of. Intelligence.”

“All I can say is that our inability to keep pace with Ainz-sama’s considerations is truly unbecoming.”

The Guardians’ praise stabbed at Ainz like swords.

Although Ainz could not help but think of it as mockery, the Guardians eyes were filled with respect and loyalty, and their worship of him was genuine. Therefore, Ainz did not contradict them, but instead used his acting skills to answer, as usual.

“There is nothing of that sort. It was merely a coincidence. And in the end, Demiurge and Albedo saw through it.”

“No, if Ainz-sama had not responded thusly, I would not have been able to connect the dots.”

“Demiurge is correct. Planning so far ahead without any knowledge of the situation is a feat only possible by the greatest of the Supreme Beings. I have fallen even deeper in love with you.”

“As expected of Ainz-sama, whose intellect surpasses even that of Demiurge, the wisest mind in Nazarick,” Shalltear said.

“It’s true! Ainz-sama is really amazing!” Aura exclaimed.

“Mm! R-really amazing!”

“I. Have. Long. Known. Ainz-sama. Possessed. Excellent. Abilities. But. I. Could. Not. Imagine. The. Extent. Of. His. Prowess… As. Expected. Of. The. Greatest. Treasure. Of. Nazarick.”

“Well put. He is filled with compassion and overflows with wisdom. There is no better master for us than Ainz-sama,” Albedo said.

“…Ahh.”

“Come to think of it, there is a matter that needs to be decided. Although I have no problems addressing Ainz-sama as ‘King’, I fear that simply leaving his title as such will invite confusion with the maggots surrounding us. I feel we must consider a more fitting form of address for Ainz-sama.”

The Guardians unanimously approved Demiurge’s suggestion.

“Do you approve, Ainz-sama?”

“It is fine. Do as you see fit.”

Being called King Ainz Ooal Gown was bad enough. His emotion override had already kicked in several times when he thought about the implications of naming himself a king.

“Does anyone have any suggestions?”

“Then, allow me to begin,” Shalltear said as she raised her hand. “The name we choose should obviously indicate Ainz-sama’s surpassing beauty. I feel the Beautiful King would be fitting.”

Ohhh, the Guardians chorused in approval.

Beautiful King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“Oh, me! Meee~” Aura piped up as she raised her hand. “The name should highlight Ainz-sama’s power! How about the Powerful King, or Power King for short?”

I see, the Guardians murmured.

Power King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“Then, then. M-may I try? Erm… because Ainz-sama is very kind, it might be good to let people know that. Then, then, m-maybe we could try, the Merciful King?”

The Guardians nodded

Merciful King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“As for me—” Here Demiurge paused for effect. “—to praise Ainz-sama’s exalted intellect, I propose the Wise King.”

Wise King Ainz Ooal Gown? …I feel bad about saying no, but I’ll pass on that.

“What do you think, Sebas?”

In response to Albedo’s question, Sebas replied, “I think a simple ‘king’ will do.”

“Then, I shall go. Because he is the Supreme Being who stands atop all the other Supreme Beings, I think the Supreme King would be appropriate.”

The Guardians once more murmured in approval.

Supreme King Ainz Ooal Gown? If they all say that… it sounds awfully over-the-top.

Everyone’s eyes rested on the only Guardian who had not yet spoken.

“How about you, Cocytus? Although it might be a bit difficult to compete with Supreme King, do you have any titles you feel are fitting of Ainz-sama?”

“Umu. In. Future. Ainz-sama. Will. Rule. Many. People. Therefore. He. Will. Be. A. Magician. Who. Rules. As. A. King. I. Think. Sorcerer. King. Will. Best. Fit. That.”

The Guardians did not reply immediately.

However, all of them looked at Ainz. From the look in their eyes, they all felt there was no better title than that one, although Albedo seemed a little disappointed.

“Very well. Then we shall use Cocytus’ suggestion.”

Ainz slowly rose to his feet.

“When our nation is founded, I shall crown myself the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown!”

Ainz waved his hands in embarrassment to ward of the thunderous applause which followed. In truth, his back was starting to feel a little itchy.

“Well then! Let us demonstrate the power of Nazarick in the battle between the Kingdom and the Empire!”

“It is as Ainz-sama says. They wish to investigate the limits of Ainz-sama’s power. Little do they know, they have played right into our hands.”

Demiurge continued, in an excellent mood.

“Before negotiations can take place, the most important thing is to strike a mighty blow to the other party and let them understand the difference between our might and theirs. Foolish creatures like humans will do foolish things because they do not realize how powerful their opponents are. They do not know that their wisest option is to bow their heads and lick Ainz-sama’s boots.

“Letting humans lick Ainz-sama’s boots has been considered, but should that not be a reward?”

“I see. As expected of Albedo. Ah, but if I had to lick Ainz-sama, I would choose his body~”

Ainz decided to ignore Shalltear and Albedo’s side conversation.

“Then, everyone. Begin the task of exalting the name of Nazarick!”

“Understood!”

The Guardians’ shouts of acknowledgement blended into one.

Chapter 2 - Preparations For the Battle

OVERLORD [9] The magic caster of Destroy

2章 戦争準備

Part 1

One month later

The meeting was convened within the Valencia Palace of the Kingdom of Re-Estize. Gazef Stronoff —who had been standing motionless by King Ranpossa III’s side all this while— widened his eyes as he took in the sight of all six leaders of the Kingdom’s great noble families.

The six of them gathered together was a rare occurrence indeed.

Between them, they controlled enough wealth, land and territory to rival, if not outright surpass, the King. Because of this, they frequently found reasons to excuse themselves from the King’s summons, especially the leader of the anti-royalty faction — Marquis Bowlrob, who did not even bother to hide his disdain for the King. It was bad enough that for a while, people thought the Kingdom might fall apart from within.

Next, Gazef’s eyes went to the King’s three children.

The most eye-catching of them all was the King’s third daughter, the “Golden Princess”, Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself.

After that was the Second Prince, Zanack Valurean Igana Ryle Vaiself. During the demonic disturbance, he had earned much praise when he, as a descendant of the King, had moved out for the sake of the people.

Last was the eldest son, the Crown Prince Barbro Andorean Ield Ryle Vaiself. With his strong body and neatly trimmed haircut, he was the man who Marquis Bowlrob was trying to place on the throne. Presumably, Bowlrob was in attendance for this court session at Barbro’s own request.

Any meeting attended by Marquis Bowlrob of the Noble Faction was sure to be an intense one. Gazef averted his eyes from the heavy atmosphere, which seemed to loom overhead like gathering stormclouds, and looked at the rest of the nobles.

Of the three men present, who belonged to the Royal faction, the first to catch Gazef’s eye was Marquis Volumlash, the most luxuriously dressed person in the court.

He was a man approaching forty, with symmetrical features. His domain encompassed gold and mithril mines, which made him the wealthiest man in the Kingdom. However, dark whispers circulated that he was exceedingly greedy, to the point where he would even betray his own family for a gold coin.

There were also rumors that he had betrayed the Kingdom and was selling information to the Empire. However, because of a lack of concrete evidence, nothing could be done about him. After all, beheading Marquis Volumlash —a prominent supporter of the Royal faction— without any proof would only result in the other nobles throwing in their lot with the Noble faction. If he was aware of this and took advantage of it to keep selling off information, then he would truly be the most despicable person present.

Next, Gazef’s eyes turned to the youngest and most handsome of the nobles, Marquis Pespeya.

He was married to the King’s eldest daughter, and became the head of his household at the same time as his marriage. Although little was known about his abilities and personality, his father possessed an excellent personality and was a competent man, so Gazef felt that Pespeya might take after his sire.

In contrast, the eldest among the Six Nobles was Margrave Urovana. His hair was white, and so little of it remained that there might as well have not been any at all. Though his body and limbs looked like gnarled wood, he still retained the gravitas expected of an elder.

Urovana was the most persuasive of the Great Nobles.

Arrayed against them were the three members of the Noble Faction.

First was the core of the Noble Faction, Marquis Bowlrob, who controlled the most territory among the Great Nobles. His face was heavily scarred, like that of a warlord.

As he was already in his fifties, his once-stout body which had been honed through unrelenting training was little more than a memory of the past, but his voice and predator's gaze made people think that there must have been more than a little bit of his warrior-self left in him.

Although he —as a warrior— had lost much of his strength to age, as a commander, he was a better commander than even

Gazef, which made him just as indispensable to the Kingdom as the Warrior-Captain.

Beside him was Count Ritton.

He was a man whose appearance called to mind the image of a fox, and also one of the lower-ranked members of the Six. As such, he was desperately trying to raise his status. However, his personality of not caring about others’ suffering if it meant he could expand his power was not well received by other nobles. Allying himself to Bowlrob must have been a strategic move to escape his enemies.

The final man of the Noble Faction had slicked-back blonde hair and narrow blue eyes.

His face was pale, with little sign that it had seen much sunlight. He was tall and skinny. Combined with his sallow complexion, he gave off the impression of a snake. He was not yet forty, but looked older because of his unhealthy pallor.

With mixed emotions churning in his heart, Gazef looked away from him — from Marquis Raeven.

The increasingly complex power struggles would be the problem of the next monarch.

Marquis Bowlrob and Count Ritton of the Noble Faction, as well as Margrave Urovana of the Royal Faction, all backed Crown Prince Barbro, while most of the unaffiliated nobles supported Marquis Pespeya, who had married the First Princess. Raeven was on the side of Second Prince Zanack, while Marquis Volumlash did not seem to be concerned with matters of succession.

For all these reasons, the King sat on his throne without making a fuss. If he pointed a finger at anyone, there was a danger of civil war breaking out.

Until recently, Gazef had no opinion on who should become the next King. But now, his heart was leaning toward Zanack. Either that, or Princess Renner as a dark horse, but the Kingdom, in all its long history, was never been ruled by a queen, so that was probably out of the question.

“Now then, let us begin.”

The King’s tone seemed slightly different than usual. Those with sensitive ears might have guessed the reason for today’s gathering and showed it with curious suspicion.

“Read out the proclamation delivered by the Imperial emissary.”

In accordance with the King’s orders, the vassals flanking him on both sides began reading the contents of the parchment.

The contents were roughly as followed:

The Baharuth Empire acknowledges the sovereignty of the independent Kingdom of Nazarick, ruled by the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown, and formally recognizes it as an ally of the Empire.

Originally, the region near E-Rantel was the domain of the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. The Kingdom of Re-Estize is unlawfully occupying this territory and must now return it to its rightful owner.

If the Kingdom does not comply with this demand, the Empire will aid the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown in reclaiming the Sorcerer King’s territory.

This will be a just war, fought to end unjust occupation.

After the contents were read out, the room exploded into a hubbub of discussion. These terms were insane, and so was anyone who agreed to them.

“Just in case, I have also had the scholars examine the Kingdom’s history, and no mention of any individual named Ainz Ooal Gown ruling the surroundings of E-Rantel was discovered. There is no legitimacy to this claim.”

“This is ridiculous nonsense, which lunatic’s ravings are these?!”

The boisterous cry rang throughout the hall.

Marquis Bowlrob’s formidable presence —a testament to his former glory as a warrior— seemed to give the other nobles courage, and they returned his shout with their own approval.

“Although it’s been delayed, isn’t this just the same old Imperial invasion they announce every year? They always find some stupid reason to declare war, so this time round, they must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel to throw up this magic caster’s name, right? I want to see what kind of clown they’ve given that ridiculous title of ‘Sorcerer King’.”

Count Ritton’s words were followed by the derisive laughter of the massed nobles.

“However…”

The count turned his fox-like eyes —filled with disdain— toward Gazef.

“I believe we’ve heard of this Sorcerer King madman before, haven’t we, O Warrior-Captain Stronoff?”

“Indeed, he was the magic caster who lent me a helping hand at the outskirts of E-Rantel.”

Count Ritton delivered his cold mockery with an irritating laugh.

“I see, he must have helped because he thought they were his own peasants.”

The scornful laughter of the nobles could be heard all around, yet nobody stopped it, because Gazef, who was born a commoner, was hated by many members of the Noble faction.

If it had been a member of the Royal faction, the King would have intervened, but since Count Ritton belonged to the opposition, the King could only furrow his brow.

“Seems like it was the Empire burning down the farming villages near E-Rantel, don’t you think? The Warrior-Captain said something about the Slaine Theocracy, and then receiving aid from some Gown fellow, right? Isn’t he involved with the Empire? And didn’t someone else also say that the bodies of the ambushers who nearly killed the Warrior-Captain vanished without a trace?”

In his mind, Gazef recalled the sight of the powerful members of the Six Scriptures, as well as the mighty silhouette of Ainz Ooal Gown.

“Although the bodies vanished as Count Ritton said, I do not feel the Empire was involved. When I was at Carne Village, the knights that attacked us were far stronger than those of the Empire. They used angels, and there’s no doubt that they were a unit from the Slaine Theocracy.”

“And why would the Theocracy do that?”

How should I know?

Indeed, if Gazef could give an answer like that, it would make him feel a lot better.

Just as the court was about to fall into squabbling due to Gazef’s silence, a voice of aid rang out from Ritton’s side.

“That mad magic caster is irrelevant! What we need to decide on is how to respond to the false Emperor, isn’t that so, your Majesty?”

“It is as Marquis Bowlrob says. We need to decide what the Kingdom’s answer will be.”

“I beg your permission to speak,” Marquis Pespeya said as he advanced. “Accepting the Emperor’s terms will be very difficult. Our only recourse is war.”

The mention of war sparked activity amongst the serried ranks of the nobility.

“Ah-ah, now is the time to crush them once and for all, and then take the fight to the Empire’s doorstep.”

“You’re absolutely right, I’m tired of the constant Imperial invasions.”

“It’s time to let the fools in the Empire know what they’re dealing with!”

“Exactly, just as the Marquis says.”

These words, sandwiched by scattered laughter and repeated throughout the throng of nobles, grated unbearably on Gazef’s ears.

The last few years, they had met the Empire on the field of battle at Kattse Plains.

For the most part, they had simply drawn up battle lines and confronted each other, or exchanged arms briefly with minor losses to the Kingdom. This year would probably be more of the same, and the nobles took on an air of laxity as they imagined the same old events playing out again.

However, Gazef spoke out, spurred by the cry of his warrior’s instincts.

“Don’t think that this battle will end in a small skirmish like it always has!”

The nobles looked like they’d been splashed with a basin of cold water, and turned resentful looks on him.

“I see. This is what our Warrior-Captain really believes. Can you give us a reason for that?”

“Yes, your Majesty, that is—”

The image of a certain person set alarm bells ringing through his heart.

“—That is to say, it is because of that great magic caster, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“That being the case, the only one of us who has actually seen him face to face would be you, Warrior-Captain. That means we must give some weight to your words. Can you tell us what makes you say that?”

Gazef did not know how to answer. He did not know how to explain it, but his warrior's instinct was telling him that making that kind of decision about this war would be extremely dangerous.

"Your Majesty, could you not hand over the outskirts of E-Rantel to the Empire, no, to that magic caster?"

After a moment's silence, the shouts flew like hail.

"You craven coward! How shameless can you get, you chicken-heart?!"

These shouts came from the nobles of the Royal faction.

"After his Majesty showed you such kindness, you turn around and tell him to surrender his demesne to outsiders? When did you start serving the false Emperor?! Not to mention, you haven't even answered his Majesty's question!"

In the face of such deserved castigation, Gazef could not answer. Had he been in their position, he might have well done the same thing.

“Enough.”

The one who reached a helping hand out to Gazef in his time of need was his beloved King.

“But, your Majesty!”

“I am deeply grateful that my subjects would be so moved on my behalf. It is because of that reason that I ask you to remember that my Warrior-Captain would never betray me. For my sake, he has fearlessly thrust himself into danger countless times. Someone like that would never do anything which would harm me.”

The nobles who had shouted at Gazef bowed to the King. While he acknowledged this fact, he continued speaking to Gazef.

“Warrior-Captain, whom I trust like my right hand. Even if you are the one who puts forth that proposal, I cannot agree to it. No ruler should give up the land he rules without a fight. Such an act cannot be allowed for the sake of the people who live upon it.”

Handing land over while moving all the residents off without harming them was nothing more than a fairytale. Even if it was possible, there would be no way to allow the displaced residents to live like they used to, and in the end their lives would be worse off for it.

“That is undoubtedly so, your Majesty, and I hope you will forgive me for my foolish words.”

Gazef lowered his head as his King, who loved the people so dearly, spoke to him. If he was a noble who simply saw his people as a means of profit, the King would not have said what he did. It was because of the King’s compassion that Gazef was willing to pledge his life to him.

He recalled the words he spoke to his vice-captain half a year ago.

“When you seek help, the ones who will come are the nobles. The strong will bring aid.”

“Those are the ones who will come to the aid of the weak, regardless of the danger.”

The Gazef from before he had entered the grand martial tournament would never have said such things. Much like his vice-captain, he would have thought that there were no nobles who would risk themselves for the commoners.

After he began serving the King, however, Gazef realized for the first time that such nobles existed. Regretfully, said nobles lacked power.

There had been many lives that he could not save, and just as many incidents where the nobles' pointless pride had led them to throw obstacles in his way.

Even so, the man he served had not given up. He had continued working toward building a kingdom where its people would be able to live better lives day by day.

Gazef was proud of his King, Ranpossa III. If that was not the case, he would have defected to the Empire when the Emperor himself had tried to win him over.

But it was precisely because he was such a man that dark clouds loomed heavy over his heart.

What the King spoke was the truth, and he had the right view of things. The King had always been full of compassion, but Gazef knew the reason why the King had taken such a harsh tone.

After the demonic disturbance, the balance of power between the two factions had shifted greatly.

For a long time, the Kingdom had been divided into two factions that had been largely even until recently, but now the Royal faction had expanded, while the Noble faction had shrunk.

Because the King had boldly ridden forth and driven Jaldabaoth back, he was seen by the people as a strong ruler, and a fair number of nobles had thrown their support behind the King. Thus, the King could not afford to show weakness here. However, saying that would mean—

“Still, the Warrior-Captain has a point, no? We can avoid a war for the price of just one city. A king also has a duty to prevent undue suffering to his people. Would not a true king be willing to sacrifice of his own body for the sake of the people?”

The one who spoke was from the Noble faction. The words were pretty, but they were calculated to reduce the amount of land controlled by the King, and as such, the Royal faction rebutted them.

“That land is the demesne of the King! If you would hand over our Kingdom’s land, why not surrender yours first?!”

The Noble faction was also swift to reply.

“What nonsense is that?! The Empire asked for E-Rantel and its surroundings! Do you really believe they’d accept land from the other side of the Kingdom? Why don’t you think before you speak?!”

The Royal faction had grown stronger, while the Noble faction had gotten weaker. That simply made the Noble faction even more desperate to hamstring the King.

The upset balance between the two factions was the source of Gazef’s unease. In their desperate attempt to erode the power of the Royal faction, they might plunge the Kingdom into civil war.

That being the case, it was only natural for the King to want to quell the potential revolt with a demonstration of his power. But that would mean—

If he could not admit his weakness, was that not a dangerous thing in itself?

Lost in his thoughts, Gazef only snapped back to reality after several hard stares from members of the Royal faction. Because he had suggested handing over the Kingdom’s territory, they must have thought he had gone over to the Noble faction.

They were giving him looks that said, “You upjumped peasant, have you forgotten the grace which the King showed to you?”

“Then, why don’t you propose the exchange of your lands with E-Rantel, and then hand it over?!”

“As if land could be bought and sold like swine at a market! You fools!”

“You are the fools here!”

The childish squabbling engulfed the entire meeting hall. In the past, disputes like this would have ended in a stalemate due to the even balance of power, but now the voices of the Royal faction were louder than those of the Noble faction.

Normally, the King would have stopped this. He did not seem inclined to do so now, probably because the Royals had the advantage.

Nobody would put an end to circumstances which favored themselves. The King must also have wanted to vent his frustrations with the Noble faction.

It’s like he’s drunk a sweet poison…

Slowly, Gazef began to feel a cold, black conviction in the eyes of the Noble faction.

Unconsciously, he shivered.

The attack of the archdemon Jaldabaoth had been the start of everything.

At that time, the king’s decision to take to the battlefield was arguably the best one. Without his help, the battle lines might have broken and the adventurers would have been overrun. If ‘Blue Rose’ had gone down with them, the Kingdom would have been in a great predicament.

However, as Gazef looked at the scene unfolding in front of him, he could not help but wonder if they should have done something else instead.

What would this court session have been like if the standings of both factions had been even?

I don’t know, but… ah, that’s right, what if we lost this war with the Empire? Would we continue resisting to the end? The Royal faction’s power would be greatly decreased, while that of the Noble faction would go up. Would we return to the days when both were evenly matched? Or would the balance of power crumble completely and plunge the country into civil war? Would that be all right?

He disliked this feeling…The feeling that despite making his own choices, he was ultimately still dancing to the tune of someone else.

Could it be that all this had been planned from the moment I met Gown-dono? I don’t want to think that might be the case, but I didn’t get a feeling like that during our short time talking to each other.

From the way Gazef addressed him with honorifics even in his speech — and his thoughts — it was clear that he bore no illwill toward the magic caster Ainz Ooal Gown.

…*Maybe he could peacefully take control of… ah, no, if I continue thinking like this it'll be treason.*

“I think it's about time we stopped this petty squabbling.”

A deep male voice cut through the commotion — everyone fell silent as they tried to find its source.

Gazef bit his lip as someone else usurped the role the King was supposed to play.

That victory was as sweet as honey…

He did not think it was a big deal. However, would the King forget himself in that sweetness? Would the King that Gazef was so proud of disappear? He could not erase such thoughts from his mind.

“Your Majesty, if the Empire's invasion is a foregone conclusion, then we must prepare ourselves.”

“Marquis Raeven, his Majesty alone—”

The words of the Noble faction were interrupted by Raeven.

“—I’ll thank you to reconsider. If his Majesty’s troops are defeated, who knows where the Empire will attack next? So, for the sake of protecting my domain, I will protect the King’s.”

Silence fell.

The Kingdom’s troops were conscripted civilians. There was no way they were a match for the Empire’s knights. The only way to defeat the Empire’s advantage in troop quality was with troop quantity. That had been the way things went for the past few years, but if they couldn’t even muster up sufficient troops to match the Empire’s, then the outcome of the war was already a foregone conclusion.

After hearing Raeven’s words, the members of the Noble faction imagined the Imperial knights ravaging their lands as well.

The first to announce their support for the King were the nobles who held land between the capital and E-Rantel, followed by the nobles who held close ties to the first group, and in the end, all the nobles pledged their support.

“All right. Then, we shall delay our reply to the Empire, and gather our troops at the usual place before we answer them. Naturally, I will be going as well.”

“Please let me join you on the battlefield, father!”

The one shouting was Prince Barbro, who had been waiting silently at the side until now.

“…No, no. There’s no need for the eldest son and heir to the throne to take the field. I will handle this.”

Crown Prince Barbro turned to the speaker, the second prince Zanack. Barbro’s answer was short and to the point.

“No need?!”

His retort was filled with anger.

Zanack’s proposal was a reasonable one. Since the king was already headed to the battlefield, it would be far too dangerous to bring his eldest son along with him. Barbro understood this, but even so, his refusal came from his hatred of Zanack.

Said hatred once again stemmed from the demonic disturbance.

During the demonic disturbance, Zanack had patrolled the capital and earned the praise of many citizens. Barbro, on the other hand, hid inside the palace, and as such, the number of nobles supporting Zanack had increased as well.

At a glance, Zanack did not look particularly heroic, and the contrast between his looks and his brave deeds drew attention. Conversely, Barbro looked impressive, but his inaction made him appear cowardly. In order to erase this shame, Barbro wanted to go to the battlefield to show his martial valor.

The Crown Prince was a reasonably talented warrior, in keeping with his appearance. Although he had been brought up in a sheltered lifestyle, and was not a match for Princess Renner’s bodyguard Climb who had tirelessly trained himself, he could still be said to be the strongest fighter of the royal family. To him, it was unthinkable that Zanack —who would lose his balance after swinging a sword but once, due to his weight— could ever be considered a greater warrior than himself. That was a disgrace he could not endure. Although Marquis Raeven had once said, “What good is a king’s swordplay?”, Barbro was Zanack’s intellectual inferior, and as such, he was even more determined not to lose out in his chosen field of warfare.

No matter what, one couldn’t keep trailing behind one’s opponent in the game of thrones.

Gazef’s gut ached as he considered the potential crisis hiding within the Kingdom.

Although he wanted to resign his commission after the King abdicated and dedicate himself to protecting Ranpossa III, realistically speaking, it would probably be very difficult to do that.

In addition, it would probably be a failure in himself as a loyal servant of his Majesty if he did not save a life that could be saved. Not to mention the king’s abdication itself was in question.

If there was someone who could replace him, then he would gladly hand his position over. However, such people were in short supply. There was one person who could hold his own against Gazef, but that person would never agree to become the Warrior-Captain.

What's Brain planning to do in the future? Does he have something in mind?

Although Brain had become Princess Renner's direct subordinate, Gazef had a feeling that he would leave soon. If he did vanish, it would probably be to hone his sword skills. As a man bound to the courts, Gazef could not help but admire that lifestyle.

He recalled Brain's polished swordsmanship.

After the demonic disturbance, Gazef and Brain had exchanged blows in a friendly spar.

Although Gazef had triumphed in that no-holds-barred match, he could feel the hours Brain had put into his sword work as the wind of his sword's passage blew through his hair.

Who knew, in a few years' time, Brain might end up becoming stronger than himself.

If Brain agreed to take my place, I'd focus my energy into training the next generation, so the Kingdom would have its share of skilled warriors in the future.

“I certainly agree!”

Marquis Bowlrob’s voice interrupted Gazef’s thoughts. Now was not the time to worry about the distant future.

“If you will permit me, I would gladly contribute my strongest troops to the effort and to the protection of his Majesty’s person. How about that, your Majesty?”

“Umu. Warrior-Captain, what do you think?”

He could not pretend that he had not heard it. That would be a lie. Gazef put on a show of earnest consideration, while ignoring the twitch of Raeven’s eyebrow.

It was probably Bowlrob’s suggestion, who supported Barbro as the next king, for Barbro to fight at the front. However, Gazef had no proof of this, so there was only one answer he could give.

“I believe it all depends on his Majesty’s opinion.”

The King nodded deeply, and Gazef suddenly felt a pang of guilt.

“Is that so… well, if that’s the case… then you shall come along as well.”

“Yes! Allow me to present the false emperor’s head to you, Father!”

As he listened to Barbro’s enthusiastic reply, Gazef could only hope that the impending preparations would blow away the clouds of unease forming over his heart.

♦ ♦ ♦

Marquis Raeven’s political ability was second to none among the Six Great Nobles, so one would expect that the office where he showed his abilities would be an impressive one. Yet, this was not the case. Many would be surprised by how the orders which determined the future of the Kingdom were drafted in such a humble, cramped place.

The room’s interior was filled with bookshelves, and the books and scrolls were neatly arranged in a way that hinted at their owner’s personality. However, it was not because of these things that the room was so small, although they were part of the reason for it.

The greatest reason could not be seen by the naked eye.

Raeven’s home was built of bricks coated in stucco. This was customary when it came to the construction of a noble home, and Raeven’s office was no exception.

However, the interior of those walls were coated with copper sheets that enveloped the entire room.

This was done to interfere with spells used to eavesdrop, observe or detect his location.

The windowless room felt a little claustrophobic, but from a cost-effectiveness point of view, it was practical and had to be endured.

Upon returning from Valencia Palace, Raeven had made a beeline for this office, which was proofed against magic. He crossed to the other side of his sturdy working desk before flopping down onto his chair, his body devoid of energy.

Then, he covered his face with his hands. He did not look anything like a great noble who commanded unrivalled power and privilege in the Kingdom. Instead, he looked like a middle-aged man, worn down to exhaustion by the weight of stress and responsibility.

He brought up the limp strands of his blonde hair in his fingers, combing them back up as his face twisted.

After taking a deep breath, the stress accumulated during the court session turned to anger, which filled his heart. In moments it had exceeded his limit, and burst forth like an explosion.

“Those bloody, bloody, *bloody* idiots!”

Nobody understood what was going on. No, if someone had understood and was taking advantage of the situation, they would be masterful schemers indeed.

Right now, the Kingdom was in great peril.

The Empire’s frequent sabre-rattling lead to severe problems such as food shortages, and then there were other issues that were starting to precipitate. The only reason why no cracks in the Kingdom had appeared so far was because the nobles honestly believed “we just need to hold on a bit longer until the other faction collapses first”.

The Empire employed professional warriors known as knights, but the Kingdom had no equivalent soldiers among their ranks. To resist the Imperial invasions, they needed to conscript peasants in their levies. And of course, this meant that the villages would run short of manpower.

With that as their objective, the Empire aimed to invade the Kingdom during fall, the harvest season, when they would need the most manpower.

During the busiest season of a farming village, the impact of their adult males — the most important source of labor — going missing could not be overstated. Of course, the idea of simply not conscripting as many people had come to mind, but in the face of the Empire’s military, who were far better trained and armed, the Kingdom could not muster any resistance without the weight of numbers on their side.

There had been one occasion when a lack of conscripts had resulted in a tremendous loss for the Kingdom. Fortunately, the counterattack led by Gazef had succeeded, killing two of the original Four Knights and putting an end to the war, since both sides had won and lost. However, the truth was that the national power of the Kingdom had decreased, and in light of the many citizens lost, the Kingdom had come out on the losing side of the equation.

And even during these circumstances…

“That traitorous filth! This foolish power struggle! Those idiots, fighting over a stupid seat!”

Marquis Volumlash, one of the Six Great Nobles, had betrayed the Kingdom by selling its information to the Empire. The nobles had split into two factions and were struggling for dominance. Both princes were eying the succession like dogs feuding over a bone.

Marquis Raeven pounded on his desk repeatedly, venting his anger.

“The King’s no better either! He’s no fool and he’s not drunk on power, but he isn’t thinking at all! The way he’s clinging onto the throne will only fan the flames of the succession crisis to greater heights! Princess Renner gave him a good opportunity by making things favorable for the Royal faction, so he should hurry up and transfer power already!”

During the demonic disturbance, the one who had encouraged the king to take the field personally was Princess Renner.

Because of that, the Royal faction’s influence had increased greatly, and they should have been able to put Prince Zanack on the throne if they had advocated it then and there. However—

“It ended up like this because he pitied his first son. It’s not like I don’t understand his feelings, but nobody’s thinking about what’s important! Nobody at all!”

Strictly speaking, this was not true. There were people in the Kingdom who thought of the future and what was important for the country. The problem was that all of them were in Raeven’s camp.

He should not have concentrated them all under his wing. Instead, he should have carefully disseminated them throughout the other factions and had them influence the leaders from the inside. However, his irritation was not aimed at himself for not doing this earlier, but at the members of the other factions, whose brainlessness was giving him headaches.

“Idiots, each and every one of them!”

Raeven shouted in frustration as he called them to mind, these simpletons who could only see the bait dangling in front of them, whose intellect was no better than goblins.

“—Even so, what should I do? Think, Raeven, think!”

Raeven’s frustration grew as his breathing calmed.

He had to think of how to keep the Kingdom going, even in the face of the dangers ahead.

“To begin with, this war with the Empire is dangerous, especially if that Ainz Ooal Gown commands great power. I should start by assuming he can cause over 10'000 casualties by himself before I begin strategic planning. Then at the same time, I’ll push for the prince to be the next king… Will that be too difficult? ”

Raeven spoke the words on his mind out loud while he organized his thoughts. Honestly, he wanted to share this matter with someone and discuss it with them.

That was why Raeven supported Prince Zanack. The Second Prince was his only ally —though there was now another person, Princess Renner— amongst the royals. Both of them understood the danger which the Kingdom faced, and he considered her a comrade in arms when it came to planning for the future.

If only he could ascend to the throne, it would take a weight off his right shoulder.

“…I don’t think he was joking when he promised to make me the Prime Minister. Though I can’t relieve the burden on my left shoulder, at the very least it would improve the Kingdom’s condition.”

Raeven’s current objective was to place Prince Zanack on the throne. If he failed in that, the country would take another step toward ruin.

“With Princess Renner’s help, my job would be easier, at least.”

Raeven sighed heavily as he gave voice to his thoughts and future plans.

Even he had days when he wanted to just put everything down and walk away.

Sometimes, the excessive worrying had even made him contemplate destroying the Kingdom with his own hands, although that particular thought had only come up once or twice.

It was like he was trying to build a sandcastle, surrounded by little brats trying to kick it down. At times, he felt like destroying the sandcastle himself, just to deny them the satisfaction. Still, he had a reason for ignoring those destructive impulses and carrying on like he did.

There was a knocking on the door.

The sound seemed to come from a lower position than usual. For a moment, Raeven displayed an expression that was unlike his normal self. Perhaps you could say his expression melted; his eyebrows were drooping, and even the corner of his mouth was uncharacteristically relaxed.

“Oh, that’s not good. I can’t show a face like this.”

Raeven lightly smacked his face, since his willpower was insufficient to restore the proper dignity to it. After tidying up his wild hair, he turned to the metal door and spoke so the person on the other side could hear. Though his voice was loud, it contained a surprising gentleness that indicated that he was not angry.

“Come in.”

The speed of the door opening was indicative of how much the other party had been looking forward to it.

On the other side of the door was a boy.

A faint blush was visible on the pale skin of the boy’s innocent face. He looked to be around five years old, and he padded across the floor, stopping at Raeven’s knee.

“Now now, you know you shouldn’t be running indoors, it’s hardly refined.”

A female voice followed the boy over to Raeven.

She was a woman with a pretty face that was shadowed by gloominess. She did not seem like a happy woman. Her clothes were of exquisite make, but their colors were muted.

The woman bowed primly to Raeven, and then she smiled.

With a hint of embarrassment, Raeven returned the smile.

His wife had only started smiling recently.

Raeven could not help but recall those days.

When he was a younger man, his heart brimmed with the ambition and drive that was the hallmark of youth. And the target of his ambition was the throne.

Aspiring to the throne was a treasonous dream.

The young Marquis Raeven, filled with confidence in his abilities, probably felt that he had no other goal that was worthy of being his lifelong objective. Toward that end, he had worked quietly, expanded his influence, accumulated wealth, expanded his connections, crushed his enemies—

Taking a wife was nothing more than a part of his plan. As long as he could sell off the position of marchioness at a high price, he did not care what kind of woman he ended up with. As it turned out she was a beautiful, yet gloomy woman, but Raeven didn’t mind. After all, the important thing was the connections he made with his wife’s family.

Their home life was ordinary.

No, that was just how Raeven felt it was. He cared for the woman he married as a tool, but there was no love between them.

As fate would have it, it was a tiny thing indeed that changed Raeven.

He turned his eyes to the boy in front of him.

The first thing he thought when he learned he had a son was that he had another tool to use. However, as the newborn boy clutched his finger with his tiny hands, something broke inside him.

This was his son, which seemed as much a monkey as a human being. He certainly did not think that it was adorable. Yet, when he felt the warmth that radiated from his finger, everything else seemed to fade away.

Who cared about the throne?

The man driven by ambition had passed away, unseen and unmourned.

Then, when Raeven smiled in thanks to his wife that had just given birth to his son, he vividly remembered the expression on her face, which was a funny one, even if he would never say that out loud. He remembered that it seemed to ask, “Who is this person?”

At the time, his wife had thought that this was just a quirk caused by learning that he had an heir. However, Raeven continued changing after this, and it made his wife wonder if there was something wrong with him.

In the end, when his wife considered her husband before and after his change, she came to the conclusion that she preferred the new Raeven, and her attitude shifted as well.

The two of them were, at long last, a normal married couple.

Raeven reached down and lifted up his son, who was trying to scale his kneecap.

The boy gurgled in delight as he was placed on Raeven’s thigh. He could feel the heat of his body through his clothes, and the familiar weight felt comfortable. A warm, steady satisfaction radiated endlessly from his heart.

Now, Raeven had only one objective.

‘I want to leave a well-kept domain to my son.’ It was a goal that any noble father would have.

Raeven looked warmly to the boy on his leg, and spoke to him.

“What’s the matter-chu? Rii-tan? Chuchu~”

Only two people in the world would ever see a Great Noble puckering his lips and going “~chu”.

One of them, the boy, gurgled in delight.

“…Darling, babytalking him will spoil his grammar.”

“Hmph! Nonsense, that’s nothing more than a baseless rumor.”

Although his mouth said that, Raeven reflected that it would be bad if he raised his son poorly.

Since he was his son, that meant that he must have some measure of talent. Or rather, it didn’t matter even if he didn’t have talent, but as his parents, they had an obligation to discover or cultivate their child’s abilities. As such, being a bad influence on him was unthinkable. Still, he would not give up the pet names for him.

Love was the best teacher, after all.

“Isn’t that right, Rii-tan? What’s the matter? Do you want to tell Papa something?”

Raeven ignored his wife’s perturbed expression and asked again.

“Ehehehe, it’s about that~”

He looked like he wanted to share a secret of some sort, judging from the way he covered his mouth with his little hands. As he saw that movement, the corners of Raeven’s eyes relaxed, and he made a face one would never expect of the man who had been referred to as a snake.

“Well, what is it? Can you tell Papa~n? Uwah~ what is it?”

“Tonight’s dinner~”

“Mm, mm!”

“It’s Papa’s favorite!”

“Mm! Papa~n will be very happy! What’s for dinner tonight?”

“It’s Gabra fish à la meuniere.”

“Is that so— What’s wrong? Rii-tan?”

Raeven saw the unhappy expression on his son’s face and frantically followed up with a question.

"I should have been the one to say it!"

A bolt of lightning seemed to flash across Raeven's back.

"Is that ~chu er, I mean, is that true? Well, then it's Papa~n's fault. Please forgive me. Rii-tan, do you want to tell me anything?"

As Raeven looked at her with furrowed brows, his wife, not knowing what to do, covered her face.

"Rii-tan, why don't you tell Papa~n?"

With a *hmph* of annoyance, the boy jerked his head aside. The small motion had a massive impact on Raeven. With his despair-filled face, he looked like he had just been ordered to commit suicide.

"I'm really sorry, Rii-tan, Papa~n is a moron and forgot everything, could you tell me?"

His son glanced at him from the corner of his eye. He didn't seem ready to make a decision yet.

“Not telling Papa~n? Papa~n’s going to cry~”

“That — About that, it’s Papa’s favorite fish~”

“Really now? Papa is so happy to hear that!”

Raeven couldn’t help kissing his son’s pink cheeks. Because it tickled, the boy laughed innocently.

“All right, then let’s go have dinner!”

“—-I don’t think it’s ready yet.”

“—What.”

An annoyed expression spread over Raeven’s face, as though a basin of cold water had been dumped over his head. Although it was an easy matter to order the chefs to hurry up, they still needed to follow the appropriate steps to do their work, and those steps had to be executed with specific timing. Thus, if he selfishly disrupted their routine, the food would not be as good as it could be.

As such, even if he was not happy about the wait, Raeven did not give those orders. It was also because he wanted his son to have the best meal possible.

“All right, your father needs to work. Let’s go.”

“Kay~”

Raeven could not hide the despondence he felt as he heard his son’s lively reply.

“Koff! Wait, actually, I’m done with work.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Don’t worry, work is over.”

“…Is that so? It’s not good to procrastinate.”

“…”

Even if his wife turned a cold stare on him, Raeven would not let his son go. He clutched the boy tightly, and sighed as he felt the heat from his son’s hot body flow into him.

“…Well, I was already at a dead end anyway,” he muttered. “Not like I could finish it in a day.”

This was not an excuse. He did not have anything urgent to take care of.

His wife nodded in acknowledgement.

“I understand, but still… it seems really troublesome.”

“That’s what I said. I don’t need more arms or legs to do my work, just good heads.”

“How about my brother?”

“He’s talented, but given that your family’s busy enough with its domain as it is, I don’t think I could call him over, right? Do you know anyone else who can be trusted?”

Raeven had already asked this question several times, and his wife had given him the same answer; *there’s no noble who can deal with these matters like you can*.

The truth was that if someone else was like that, his life wouldn’t have been as difficult as it was now. In the end, all that he could do was to look among the commoners. If this was a place like the Empire, where there was a centralized system of education that trained people up for public service, it would have been fine, but in the Kingdom, looking for hidden talents was like finding a needle in a haystack. All he could do was listen to rumors of talented people and recruit them.

As he thought of how much time and effort this would need, Raeven’s heart sank. At this moment, his son had a good idea.

“Papa~n, I want to help you to work too~”

“Uwah~ Rii-tan, thank you very much! I love ~chu most of all!”

Raeven did not stop kissing his son as he continued his baby talk. This was without doubt the happiest moment of his life.

He could forget the stress of his daily life and achieve a small measure of peace.

Even if I have to sacrifice myself, I will protect all of this, Raeven vowed in his heart.

Part 2

It had been two months since the Empire’s declaration of war, and now it was winter.

In villages all over the Kingdom, the bulk of the work had transited from outdoors to indoors. Fewer people ventured outside now, and not many people were still working. This was true even for the adventurers, who typically worked all year round.

Although there were cases where hungry monsters suddenly appeared in villages and requests were hurriedly made, for the most part, there was less to do. It was more dangerous to explore ruins or unknown frontiers during this period. Because of that, adventurers treated this season as something of a vacation, and channelled their energies into training, recreation or their side businesses.

That said, the Fortress City of E-Rantel was not like that. It was filled with life and energy.

This commotion, however, was somewhat different from that of other cities. The activity here was not born of the usual energy of city life.

The source of this energy came from the outermost sector of the Triple Fortress.

The countless people gathered here were shabbily dressed, and were probably peasants. But their numbers were astonishing — there were around 250'000 of them.

Of course, E-Rantel did not always have so many people in it.

It was true that E-Rantel was the nexus of trade and traffic between three kingdoms, with people, money, good and other things flowing freely through it. Because of that, the city was a large one.

However, that by itself was not enough reason for just one sector to be packed with 250'000 people.

In that case, why were there so many people here?

The ones who could best shed light on this was a group of young men.

Carrying bladeless spears —more like sticks, really— many young men stabbed and thrust at dummies made of wood and straw, clad in rusted armor and shields.

This was combat training. Everyone gathered here today — the 250'000 citizens taken from the Kingdom — had been conscripted to fight the Empire.

Loud battlecries rang out everywhere. Of course, not many of them were actually shouted in earnest. Most of them were gripped by the fear of the coming battle, and they trained to distract themselves from the nagging worry that they would not be going home after this.

Even so, not all of them were practicing in earnest.

The wars with the Empire were a yearly occurrence. As a result, many people lacked the will to fight. There were those who laid down in unobtrusive niches along the stone steps, like puppets whose strings had been cut. There were those who vented their despair to those around them. There were those who sat down and hugged their knees and waited for the end.

As the conscripts got older, they were more likely to do this.

They had no fighting spirit at all and only wanted to return home.

This was the true face of the Royal Army. Yet, it could not be helped. To begin with, they had been rounded up by force. Then they were told that they would have to risk their lives in bloody battle for no gain to them. Even if they managed to return alive, they would return to a wasted harvest, and their lives would be very difficult, like a noose slowly strangling them.

This was no different from a drawn-out execution.

The wagons rode past the soldiers. Their beds were laden with vast quantities of foodstuffs.

Logically speaking, it would be difficult to house and feed 3% of the Kingdom’s population within a single city. However, E-Rantel was the frontline of the wars with the Empire, and had been designed to accommodate the Kingdom’s military might.

As a result of the extensive preparations made to the city, it could take in 250'000 people with ease. Their storehouses were massive, and were probably the largest buildings in the city.

The supplies within those storehouses were transported by shuttle.

The unmotivated people turned fearful eyes to those wagons. It was as though they had seen Death slowly creeping towards them.

Everyone knew what was going to happen next.

This was a large-scale transfer of rations.

That meant the war with the Empire was going to begin.

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The innermost sector of the E-Rantel's triple walls.

In the center of the city was the mansion of the mayor of E-Rantel, Panasolei Guruze Dale Rettenmaier. Although it was a luxurious home worthy of the city's leader, it still paled in comparison to the building beside it.

That building was the most impressive in the city — the VIP villa. It was typically sealed up, and only the royal family or those close to them would be permitted to use it.

And now, within the villa, several men were gathered around King Ranpossa III and the Great Nobles.

Gazef stood silently at the side of the King, who sat upon a crude throne.

A large table dominated the center of the room, surrounded by nobles, who were studying the large map that had been rolled out upon it. Around the map were countless scattered documents, nominal rolls, reconnaissance reports, combat logs, monster appearance reports and the like. Although there were servants behind carrying water jugs, there was little water left.

It was testament to the intensity of the debates that had taken place here.

The truth was that fatigue was starting to appear on the distinguished, pedigreed faces of the Great Nobles. As one’s forces grew larger, there would be more logistics issues to be addressed, and more decisions that had to be made. While low-level issues could be handled by subordinates, they had to coordinate the matters of the nobles within their factions personally.

As nobles with their pride on the line, they could not even afford to show that the strain was getting to them, which made their job harder.

However, that was over now.

Marquis Raeven, who looked the least exhausted of everyone here, opened his mouth to speak.

In truth, it had become fairly common for him to take the initiative in addressing the nobles. He might have been slighted as a “bat,” but nobody doubted his intelligence. It was clear that having him speak, in a way that cut across factional lines, would be the fastest way to settle everyone down.

“Thank you all for your hard work. At last, we’ve finished our preparations within the time limit. From now on we will begin discussing the strategy against the Empire for the upcoming war.”

Raeven’s gaze swept across everyone present, and he held up a parchment for all to see.

“This is a missive from the Empire that arrived several days ago. It states the proposed site of the battlefield.”

Because battlefields would invariably be littered with corpses, the land would be cursed, and it would become a spawning ground for the undead. Thus, as a species, humanity would designate specific locations for their wars. Once both sides agreed on the site, they could do battle as they wished without harming each others’ countries.

Of course, not all wars were fought like that. Or rather, it was rare for wars to be fought that way. It was only when the Kingdom and the Empire made war that this situation would come up, and for the past few years, they had fought on designated battlefields.

Even if they took new land, it would be more trouble than it was worth if it spawned undead, and there was no point in defending land from invaders if it ended up cursed and uninhabitable anyway. Both sides shared the same point of view, hence the agreements.

For that reason, a sigh of relief came up from nowhere as Raeven announced the missive. The nobles must have thought this war would be the same as any other, given the familiar nature of the declaration.

“Then, the battlefield will be—”

“Isn’t it the same old place, Marquis Raeven? Where else could it be?”

“Indeed. As Marquis Bowlrob says, the battlefield is one we are all familiar with. The cursed land enveloped by mist, the northwestern region of the Kattse Plains.”

“Since it’s the same place, does that mean the Empire will be doing the same thing?”

Although the Empire claimed to be helping the magic caster Ainz Ooal Gown reclaim his rightful territory, most of the nobles felt that this was merely a *casus belli* for them to declare war like they always did.

If that was all, Gazef would have agreed, but Raeven shook his head.

“Unfortunately, Marquis Volumlash, that does not seem to be the case. According to my sources, the Empire has mobilized a great deal of military power for this engagement. I sent my formerly orichalcum-ranked adventurer team out to follow up on this, and while they aren’t sure of the exact figure, judging by the insignia and badges of the activated units, the Empire has fielded six full legions.”

“Six legions?!”

Dissent rippled through the gathered nobles.

The Empire had eight legions, but up to now they had only ever committed four to the field at any one time. But this time, they had brought out one and a half times that amount.

“Are they… serious?”

The question came from a noble with an uneasy expression on his face.

Six legions. 60'000 men. The Kingdom had 250'000 men, but although they had the advantage in numbers, the reverse was true in terms of troop quality.

“We may need to consider that this may not end in a simple skirmish.”

In the past, with the Empire’s 40'000 men against the Kingdom’s 200'000, the Empire would launch an attack, the Kingdom would weather it and then the war would end. The Empire’s objective was to slowly exhaust the Kingdom and waste their stocks of food, so just forcing the Kingdom to take the field would accomplish one of their objectives.

If they were planning on doing the same thing, there would be no need to mobilize 60'000 men. That meant they had another motive for doing this, Raeven thought.

“It seems increasing the levy was the right decision to make.”

However, the increased costs of fielding more soldiers were also a headache.

In the past, the wars had been fought during the harvest season of autumn. This war would be fought in winter, and the additional expenses for things like firewood, warm clothing and so on were beginning to add up.

This war was financed by the Royal faction. If the Royal faction’s power had not increased, it would have been hard to solicit donations, and the King’s own power would have sharply declined.

“Indeed it was, Marquis Raeven. The Empire has mobilized more troops now, under the fabricated cause of helping that magic caster king. They’ll claim that they’ll lose face if they don’t put on a good show in aiding an ally.”

“I believe that is very likely. In truth, given that we’ve received no communication from this Ainz Ooal Gown, I suspect that this incident may have been masterminded by the Empire and this Ainz Ooal Gown is only a bystander who was drawn into this. He might not even be participating in this of his own free will.”

To Gazef, if that was the truth it would be a blessing. That way they would not need to make an enemy of that mighty magic caster. However, that might be too optimistic.

Gazef opened his hitherto tightly shut mouth.

“May I speak?”

“Granted.”

With the King’s permission, Gazef began unburdening himself of his doubts.

“I disagree, much as I do with that document from the Slaine Theocracy. I do not think this declaration of war is a mere fabrication.”

Displeasure was clearly evident on the nobles’ faces.

E-Rantel and its surroundings was the meeting point of three nations. Every time the Kingdom and the Empire went to war, the Theocracy would make its opinion known.

“To begin with,” they said, “E-Rantel and its surroundings originally belonged to the Slaine Theocracy. The Kingdom has taken control of it unlawfully and they are obliged to return it to its rightful owners. It is deeply regretful that such improperly appropriated territory should become the object of a power struggle,” and so on.

To the two countries, it seemed as though the Theocracy would intervene in their war, but to date they had never mobilized their troops. Their dispute was only a verbal one.

This time, however, the tone of their official statements had changed.

“The Theocracy has no records of his reign, but if Ainz Ooal Gown has indeed controlled E-Rantel and its surroundings in the past, the Theocracy will acknowledge that fact and his sovereignty.”

That was what their communique had said.

To the nobles of the Kingdom, that declaration was nothing less than a bad joke, like a court jester coming out of nowhere and speaking wild nonsense. However, there were those who understood the true meaning behind the document.

The Slaine Theocracy was saying, “We have no intention of antagonizing Ainz Ooal Gown” on a national level.

That implied that the Slaine Theocracy, the strongest nation in the region, was not willing to make an enemy of a single magic caster.

But that was understandable, Gazef thought.

“He easily wiped out one of the Six Scriptures… and although he said he didn’t kill them, the Slaine Theocracy felt that making an enemy of a person with his level of power was a bad idea. If Ainz Ooal Gown was pulled into this war by the Empire, they wouldn’t need to roll over like this.”

“Hmph. So what if they have one more magic caster? Aren’t we the ones with 250'000 people?”

Count Lindon laughed in the face of Gazef’s caution, the mockery evident in his voice.

Gazef fought the urge to furrow his brows. Although he understood the shocking power of a great magic caster, at the same time, he also understood where Lindon was coming from.

If he knew nothing else, he would have thought the same way too.

For example, there was the famed magic caster of the Empire, Fluder Paradyne. His name was known in distant countries. He was rumored to be able to use magic of the 5th or 6th tier, but to be honest, nobody knew how powerful he really was.

That was because he had never taken part in the Empire’s wars, nor had he used his magic to rout the armies of the Kingdom.

While the 6th tier of magic was impressive, exactly how impressive it was remained to be seen.

Gazef felt that way as someone who had survived countless battles as the Kingdom’s Warrior-Captain.

The nobles were not magic casters, but had only been told about magic as part of their education. Many of the Kingdom’s nobles thought little of Fluder, thinking of him as nothing more than a posterboy for the Empire’s propaganda. The nobles who had little contact with magic-users like adventurers were even more likely to think that way.

Count Lindon was one of them. To him, magic casters were little more than street performers. Of course, the priests he turned to when he was sick or injured were a different matter.

“…I don’t think that’s quite right. They can be quite hard to deal with if they use ‘Flight’ spells and attack with area-effect magic. It’ll still be troublesome even if they just attack from a distance. Of course, professional magic casters won’t do things which don’t benefit them. Still, the Empire’s alliance with Ainz Ooal Gown is just too strange. They wouldn’t go this far if he was a simple magic caster, so we had better stay on our guard.”

Those severe words were spoken by Margrave Urovana, whose head of white hair and wrinkled face conveyed the stern dignity of a senior individual. As the oldest of the six Great Nobles, he was a clear contrast with the young Count Lindon. Every word and gesture of his made the Count nod in reluctant agreement. However, the one opposing him was Marquis Bowlrob.

“Hmph! Who’s this Ainz Ooal Gown? Like Lindon said, what can one man do? If he flies, we’ll shoot him down with bows. The same if he attacks from far away. What can one magic caster do? Those stories of magic casters who change the battlefield by themselves are just that, stories!”

"…I beg your pardon, but isn't it possible that some of the stories which bards sing of heroes might be true?"

"I believe that the Warrior-Captain-dono is not in possession of all the facts. The bards exaggerate the facts to fuel interest. After exaggerating the facts, the stories are well-removed from reality. This is only made worse as bards spin tales gleaned from other bards, given that oral traditions are prone to distortion."

"However, if they could gather a lot of magic casters that could use 'Fireball'—"

"And exactly how probable would an assembly of said magic casters be, hm? Do tell us, O Warrior-Captain-dono."

"That… I think it's not too likely."

'Fireball' was a third-tier spell. It would be impossible to amass a large number of magic casters who could use that spell, even if one had the magical academies of the Empire.

"Then, isn't that the answer? Magic is a good weapon, but no matter how powerful he is, one man cannot change the battlefield! You —forgive me— the Warrior-Captain-dono is a perfect example. While nobody can match yourself in a duel, even you can’t slay several thousand people in one go!”

He was right. Gazef could not find anything to rebutt Marquis Bowlrob’s argument.

Those tales of destroying tens of thousands in a single blow were of dubious reliability at best. Even that granny, one of the Thirteen Heroes, Rigrit Bers Carau, couldn’t accomplish such a feat.

However, the disquiet still lingered in Gazef.

Could it be that he had not met a truly amazing magic caster, but was simply clueless?

“…Then, what if it was a dragon?”

“Marquis Volumlash… that magic caster is a human, why would you even bring up a dragon?”

“No, I meant in terms of one man fighting a brigade…”

“In the first place, there’s no point mentioning dragons when we’re discussing humans! I don’t know what you’re all thinking, so afraid of a measly little magic caster—”

He turned a sharp glare to Gazef.

“As nobles of the Kingdom, you should be ashamed of yourselves, cowering at the sight of his shadow! Still, it’s not like I don’t understand the Warrior-Captain-dono’s concern… then, let us consider Ainz Ooal Gown to be a force capable of equalling five thousand men.”

“F-five thousand?!”

Lindon’s eyes went wide.

“Don’t you think it’s a little much, valuing one man as equal to five thousand? Equating him to half would still be too much.”

“I, for one, consider the Warrior-Captain-dono to be a match for a thousand men, and given that our Warrior-Captain-dono is so wary of this individual, we shall count him as being able to battle five times that amount. I have faith in the Warrior-Captain-dono's appraisal of him."

"You honor me."

Although he still doubted that Ainz Ooal Gown's combat power was only equal to five thousand men, that much was already difficult enough to believe. It would be better to thank him and try to regain a little bit of goodwill. With that in mind, Gazef lowered his head.

At this juncture, the hitherto silent Crown Prince Barbro opened his mouth.

"If I might be allowed a bit of your time… I've been thinking. Why don't we draft those adventurers into the army? After all, they work in the Kingdom, so aren't they subject to conscription? Why aren't they allowed to join the military? I don't recall any law in the Kingdom forbidding that."

The Great Nobles glanced at each other. As landlords, they clearly understood the value and power of adventurers. Because of that, they would not accept Barbro's line of reasoning.

On his part, Gazef felt that the reason why Barbro had such thoughts was because he was a member of the royal family. If he had a fief to manage, he would not think like that.

Marquis Raeven coughed.

“My prince. I trust you understand that aside from those with copper plates, every adventurer is stronger than the average soldier?”

“Umu. Of course. That’s why we should draft them. Once enlisted, they’ll produce excellent results. They’ll be able to defeat the Imperial knights with ease!”

“I do not dispute that point. However, if we did that, then our enemies — the Empire, for instance — would also conscript adventurers to counter our use of them. In that case, rather than a battle between adventurers, it would become a systematic slaughter of the rank and file by adventurers. The losses would be far greater, and many conscripts would die. This is why both sides don’t use adventurers, to avoid such an arms race. In addition, the Adventurer’s Guild would never allow it.”

Workers were also not used for similar reasons. In addition, they were usually more expensive than adventurers, and less reliable.

“Is that so… though I still don’t like that idea, I can accept it. Then what if a city was attacked? If they still didn’t join in the defense, wouldn’t that be treason, for a citizen of the Kingdom?”

“I understand the point you’re trying to make. However, they feel that they have discretion over whether or not they count as citizens of the Kingdom. In addition, they might also be traveling abroad at the time. The most important thing is that the better they are, the more the nation is diminished when they perish in battle. It may lead to a situation where a monster appears, but there’s no adventurer around capable of stopping it. As such, we need to handle adventurers carefully.”

“Marquis Raeven, did you not mention earlier that you had conscripted some retired adventurers into your forces? Something about… former-orichalcum? Why is that allowed?”

“That’s fine. They’re no longer bound by the rules of the Adventurer’s Guild once they retire and are no longer members. That’s why I hired them.”

“…I see. Although, I hear it, but I don’t quite understand it.” Soft laughter and sounds of approval came from the noble contingent.

“Still, that only applies up to adventurers ranked up to orichalcum. Adamantite-ranked adventurers are a different matter entirely. Of the two adamantite-ranked adventurer parties in the Kingdom…”

There was nobody here who didn’t know of the daring exploits of Blue Rose during the demonic disturbance.

“Before they took center stage, there was another group of adamantite-ranked adventurers. Although they’ve all retired, they haven’t been hired since then…Right, Warrior-Captain-dono?”

“That’s correct. There are four of them. One opened an exclusive sword school for pupils he chose himself. Two more went on a journey. The last one was the granny who spent some time in Blue Rose before leaving for parts unknown.”

Gazef counted the familiar faces on his fingers as he recalled them.

While he was strolling through the capital, he had been dragged into a training hall by his future teacher, and he’d been subjected to a hellish regimen of sword training and lectures.

Because of that encounter, the Gazef who should have only been a mercenary had ended up becoming the king’s champion, but even if that was the case—

No, come to think of it, those were good memories too.

“I see. I’ve also heard that this city is the base for the adventurer team called ‘Darkness’. If only we could count on the ‘Beautiful Princess’ Nabe to fight Ainz Ooal Gown… although that seems difficult.”

While that was a good idea at heart, the Adventurer’s Guild would never allow it.

Several nobles began loudly cursing the Guild.

For instance, “they’re nothing more than peasants!”

For instance, “who do they think pays them?!”

For instance, “if they’re citizens of the Kingdom, they should be helping us!”

It was only natural that those in power would be displeased by the Adventurer’s Guild which refused to submit to that power. However, it was also a fact that they were the only ones who could deal with monsters.

If the Adventurer’s Guild left the Kingdom, they would have no way of beating back powerful monsters. As a result, the Kingdom would be steadily destroyed, and not even Gazef’s presence would change that.

Monsters had many special abilities, and defeating them would require an equally diverse repertoire of attacks, defenses and healing methods. Because of this, adventurers were indispensable. The fact that the Empire incorporated magic casters and rangers into its legions was a different matter.

“A-as expected of his Highness! I feel that this is a marvellous idea!”

The one who spoke was a baron who hailed from parts unknown.

He was a minor lord among the peers present, which meant he was someone’s vassal.

“As a magic caster, she might have some insights into this situation. It might be good just to listen to what she has to say. Maybe we should send an emissary over, just in case.”

The idea met with a small amount of approval. Most of the ones who agreed were low-ranking nobles, and given the way they were praising Barbro, they were probably minions from the Noble faction.

The more-keen-eyed people made sour faces, but it seemed like the others had not noticed.

“Then go,” the king ordered in a tired voice. “Momon-dono is an adamantite-ranked adventurer. You are not to offend him under any circumstances!”

“Understood! This Cheneko will carry out the royal decree to the letter!”

“Is that so. Well, then take care not to offend Momon-dono.”

The king waved him off again after repeating his orders. The noble in question left the chamber.

He didn’t seem to have realised that if anything went wrong, he would be heartlessly cast aside.

“Hah… we’ve come a long way from the original topic. Now, where were we… ah. So for Ainz Ooal Gown’s combat power, I don’t think anyone objects to him counting for five thousand men?”

Marquis Raeven looked to Gazef.

“I have no problems with that assessment.”

Personally, Gazef felt that the figure was off by an order of magnitude at least, but he could understand that those who had not seen Ainz Ooal Gown’s power firsthand might find it hard to believe.

“I see. Then, as the Empire has already agreed on the choice of battlefield, I trust we can all begin moving our armies out toward the Kattse Plains?”

Marquis Raeven’s line of sight swept through the room, and one by one the nobles answered in the affirmative. When he reached Marquis Bowlrob at last, the man’s reply was loud and clear.

“It will be done, Marquis Raeven. My troops are ready to move out at any time. Then, your Majesty, might I make a suggestion? It concerns a matter for the Prince…”

There was only one prince present. Everyone’s eyes turned to Barbro.

“It seems that Ainz Ooal Gown once appeared to save a settlement called Carne Village. If it was purely out of altruism, that would be well and good. However, he might have had a strategic motive in mind. I feel it would be best if we mobilized some troops and tried to question the villagers on the details. I would like to entrust the command of that unit to the Prince.”

“—Marquis!”

Barbro glared at Marquis Bowlrob.

“Silence,” the king said. “That is not a bad idea. My son, I command you — go to Carne Village and learn what you can from the villagers.”

Gazef tried his best not to furrow his brows.

If they went to Carne Village now, they wouldn’t be likely to learn useful information about that magic caster. In addition, splitting their forces was hardly a wise move, even if it was a comparatively small amount.

“…The King orders and I obey. However, I wish to express that this posting is not of my will.”

Seeing that the king had no intention of withdrawing his orders, Barbro lowered his head, an unhappy expression on his face.

“I will lend you some of my elite troops to accompany you to the village. I will also send a host of noblemen to accompany the prince. The total strength of your unit will be around five thousand men.”

“I see. You’re on guard against the Empire’s special forces. As expected of Marquis Bowlrob, you’re far-sighted indeed.”

Gazef could see the logic in Raeven’s words. However, he still had his doubts that the Imperial Army would use such underhanded methods even after agreeing on the battlefield. While it was true that all warfare was based on deception, a sneak attack like this after the agreement would only disgrace themselves among the surrounding nations. The Empire would be shooting itself in the foot.

“Although I don’t feel I need so many soldiers, since the Marquis has graciously proposed the idea, I am left with little choice but to accept it.”

“Many thanks, your Highness. Then, I have one more question.”

Marquis Bowlrob paused for a moment. Rather than catching his breath, the delay was to draw attention to what he was going to say next.

“Who will be the overall commander for this battle? I trust nobody will object to myself?”

The room’s atmosphere changed.

This was an indirect declaration. It was phrased as a query, but it carried with it the unspoken weight and power of selecting the man who would wield authority over the entire army.

If asked who was the better commander between King Ranpossa III and Marquis Bowlrob, many nobles would point to the latter. This was especially true given that the Marquis’ forces made up one-fifth of the Royal army — 50'000 men.

In addition, Marquis Bowlrob also commanded elite troops. He had been inspired by Gazef’s warrior band, and had thus created a unit of professional warriors.

They were very good fighters. Although they were still inferior to the warrior band under Gazef, they were still a match for the Empire’s knights — perhaps more than a match. Of particular note were their numbers, which were numbered around 5,000. If they clashed with Gazef’s warrior band, Bowlrob’s elites would triumph by sheer weight of numbers.

If the king was not personally present, command authority would undoubtedly fall to Marquis Bowlrob. But since the king was here, it would only be natural to have King Ranpossa III as the supreme commander, though the nobles would probably not accept that.

Gazef’s expression hardened as Marquis Bowlrob placed pressure on the King, but Marquis Bowlrob remained unmoved even as he saw Gazef’s expression. To Bowlrob, Gazef was merely a commoner who was good with a sword, and allowing one not of noble blood to remain here was nearly intolerable.

“…Marquis Raeven.”

“Yes, your Majesty!”

“I’ll leave it to you. Conduct the army safely to the Kattse Plains. From there, you will also be in charge of the encampment and entrenchment.”

“Understood.”

Raeven nodded in acceptance of the royal decree. Although the spot Bowlrob wanted had been snatched away from him, if it was Raeven, Bowlrob could not complain. He knew the man was talented, and as a result, criticizing him would be very difficult. More importantly, Raeven had broad connections, and many of Bowlrob’s men owed him favors. If he tried to criticize Raeven in front of them, they would only doubt him instead. As such, Bowlrob had no choice but to grin and bear it.

“Marquis Raeven, my troops will be in your hands. Please let me know if you need anything.”

“Many thanks, Marquis Bowlrob. I will be counting on you in that event.”

Gazef was as happy over the King’s brilliant decision as though it were his own.

“Is there anything else?”

The King waited for a while, but nobody replied.

“…Then let us begin the preparations to move out. We shall leave tomorrow. It will take us two days to reach the battlefield, so do not grow lax in your preparations. Then, you are dismissed. Marquis Raeven, carry on.”

“I understand, your Majesty.”

The nobles steadily filed out of the room to begin their marching preparations, leaving only the King and Gazef.

Ranpossa III slowly turned his head. A cracking sound reached Gazef’s ear. He must have been very stiff. After stretching, an expression of relief bloomed on the King’s face.

“Thank you for your hard work, your Majesty.”

“Ahhh, it was hard work indeed. I’m tired.”

Gazef smiled wryly to his king. ‘Tiring’ was a capsule summary of managing the Royal and the Noble factions. However, there were still people who were more fatigued than Ranpossa III.

“It’s about time—”

Just as Ranpossa III was about to continue, several knocks came from the door. Then the door slowly opened, and the waiting guest entered.

He was a plump, piggish man who seemed otherwise unremarkable. His hair was sparse to the point of nonexistence, and what little remained was snowy white.

His body was round, his belly was fat, and his chin and jowls were flabby.

Yet, the light of intelligence sparkled within the eyes of this otherwise unimpressive man. Ranpossa III smiled amiably to him.

“Welcome, Panasolei.”

“Your Majesty,” said the Mayor of E-Rantel as he bowed to his liege lord. Then, he shifted his gaze.

“It’s been a while, Stronoff-dono.”

Panasolei was a noble, but yet he was exceedingly courteous to Gazef, a commoner. It was precisely because he was a man like that which resulted in him being posted to this place.

“You took care of me back then, Mayor. My thanks for arranging to heal my subordinates. I was in a hurry to report to the capital, so I rushed off without properly thanking you. Please accept my apologies.”

“Ah, no, no, think nothing of it. I understand the importance of the Warrior-Captain reporting about the ambush. How could I be so inflexible as to hold a grudge against you for that?”

Seeing that both parties were bowing to each other, the King laughed in joy.

“Panasolei, aren’t you doing that wheezing thing with your nose?”

“Your Majesty… There is no need to do so around people who do not patronize me. Or perhaps his Majesty and Stronoff-dono feel I am a jester who trades on that particular act?”

“Sorry, sorry, it was a joke. Please forgive me, Panasolei.”

“Ah, no, your humble servant overstepped his bounds. It is I who must beg your forgiveness, your Majesty. Then… shall we begin?”

“No…” The King hesitated, and then replied, “No, there’s still one more person who’s yet to arrive. Let’s wait for him.”

“Is that so. Then, may we discuss the issue of food costs within the city? After that, I shall report the projections on our national power for the next year, based on the data collected by the Marquis.”

“Umu. The sooner we get these headaches out of the way, the better.”

As Panasolei began to speak, even Gazef, who was unused to managing domestic affairs of state, ended up frowning.

His report concerned the alarming state of the country’s present and future expenses. The collection of food throughout the territories was making the shortages of food even worse. Of particular note was the fact that the country would continue declining even after the citizens here were released from their conscription.

Panasolei’s predictions were on the optimistic side, and they still painted a dire picture of things.

As for the King, his face was a blank mask.

“How did it get like this…”

“If… if the Empire continues its yearly attacks, the chances of civil war will be quite high. Given the state of taxes now, a lot of people will end up starving to death, and if we reduce taxes, we won’t have enough to fund our policies.”

Ranpossa III placed his hands on his forehead, covering his face.

This was the result of responding to years of saber-rattling with the Empire. By the time they realized the Empire’s aim, it was far too late — the Kingdom was already in decline.

“Your Majesty…”

“How… disturbing. If we’d known earlier… if we’d dealt with this before the nobles had fully split into their factions… how foolish.”

“Certainly not, your Majesty. It might have been that while dealing with the factional split, the Empire might have taken the chance to invade and conquer us.”

Gazef was certain of this — the King, Ranpossa III, had done a good job.

The conditions that had led to this situation were the result of the previous kings’ poor decisions. It was impossible for one generation to erase the accumulated sins of all its ancestors.

“I just want to leave a decent Kingdom to the next — to my children.”

Although the King spoke slowly, every word was laced with powerful purpose.

“Then… is this not an opportune time? I have many supporters now due to the disturbance. Should we not strike a telling blow to the Empire, no matter the cost, so we can win a few years of peace for the Kingdom?”

Gazef could see a light in the King’s eyes. That light made him worry. By rights, he should have opposed this, but he could not make a sound.

If the King had spoken to advance his own desires and ambitions, perhaps he might have been able to bring himself to chide him. But as he realised the King was speaking of ensuring the safety of his people and country, the words caught in his throat.

As a first-hand witness to the King agonizing over his country, the Warrior-Captain could not speak out against him.

“While that is certainly possible, I trust you’re also aware that this is a very dangerous move. If you act to reduce the power of the nobility, the country may fall into chaos.”

The King knotted his brows, and Gazef’s heart ached.

“Panasolei, as usual, you’ve hit the nail on the head. Although one might die during surgery, there’s also a chance that one might live. Regardless of what we do, the disease will spread through the body and slowly kill us. In that case, shouldn’t we step forward and seize the day?”

“My King, surgical operations are not reliable. It would be better to find another solution instead.”

“If there were some magic solution to save the Kingdom, everyone would go for it. But the barbaric method of cutting open the body to remove the diseased portion is the only cure for our present predicament.”

This frightening and crude procedure, advocated by the Minotaur Sage, was the only remedy for the Kingdom.

A gloomy silence dominated the room, which had seen a king forced to extreme measures to save his country.

Then, just as it seemed this oppressive atmosphere would last forever, a knock rang out from the door, as though to shatter the despondence in the air.

The man who entered without waiting for a response was Marquis Raeven.

“Gentlemen. I apologise for the delay.”

Relief spread through the room.

“Ah, just the man we were looking for. Marquis Raeven, I put a great burden on you.”

A look of confusion appeared on Raeven’s face for a moment as he was caught off guard, but he immediately reacted by replacing it with a tired expression.

“No, don’t take it to heart, your Majesty. In truth, entrusting command to Marquis Bowlrob would have been foolish in the extreme. After all, he only knows how to order charges and retreats.”

It was unclear whether Raeven sincerely meant his harsh criticism. Perhaps he might have said so on purpose to lighten the mood when he sensed the gloominess in the room.

“In addition, if your Majesty was to assume direct control of the army, a misstep might result in the Noble faction retreating on the eve of battle. As such, there is no commander better suited to the role than myself. That being said, working so long without rest has taken its toll on me. I wish to announce in advance that after this war is concluded, I would like to rest on my own lands for several months.”

With that, Raeven’s expression suddenly turned severe.

“I apologize for my curtness, but we can’t waste time here, so let’s get this over quickly.”

Although his face remained as cold as that of a snake’s, Gazef could sense human emotions within him, as well as qualities that he could bring himself to admire.

I was a fool to not have seen his true nature beforehand. Am I really so bad at reading people?

With regret in his heart, Gazef recalled the meeting in the King’s chambers before they left the Capital. There were five people present; King Ranpossa III, Gazef himself, Third Princess Renner, Second Prince Zanack and Marquis Raeven. Upon hearing about the last two, Gazef felt a shock that could have brought down the palace. In particular, there was that man whom Gazef despised, the man who reminded him of a snake and a scorpion… a word like shock could not fully express his reaction when he learned that Raeven was one of the most diligent and loyal nobles, working tirelessly for the benefit of the King.

“I seem to be constantly causing trouble for you, Marquis Raeven, as well as my daughter.”

Ranpossa III lowered his head to the seated Raeven, a sincere expression on his face.

“Your Majesty, please don’t do that. I’ve already acted on my own without consulting yourself; I only regret that I did not take action earlier.”

“Marquis Raeven, allow me to apologize to you as well,” Gazef said as he lowered his head. “I was deceived by surface impressions and harbored disrespectful thoughts about you without understanding your true intentions. Please forgive this foolish one.”

“Warrior-Captain-dono, there is no need to worry about that.”

“Even so, if I am not punished for my foolishness, it will stick like a thorn within my heart.”

Raeven’s face seemed to say “really?” and then he shook his head. After that, he laid sentence upon Gazef.

“I understand… then, from now on, I shall not address you as Warrior-Captain-dono, but as Gazef-dono. Consider that a token of my respect towards you.”

It was a punishment that couldn’t even qualify as a punishment.

A thought — that he had eyes, but could not see — started growing in his heart, and Gazef replied with sincere gratitude.

“Many thanks, Marquis Raeven.”

“Gazef-dono, think nothing of it. Then, let us begin discussing the direction in which the Kingdom will go from this day forth.”

Part 3

Gazef passed through the main gate and reached the company stables on the outer ring of the city. He exhaled deeply, to relieve the fatigue clouding his mind.

He was exhausted.

The meeting he'd just attended made him acutely aware that he was a mere commoner.

As he stood by the King's side and moved through noble society, he'd gradually come to understand the way they thought.

Even so, he frequently encountered responses and attitudes that only those born and bred to the nobility would understand. Gazef couldn't understand why they would think that way, especially the concept of valuing the pride of the nobility over concrete benefits.

Or no, even more inscrutable than that was the idea of prioritizing one's pride over one's citizens.

Gazef slowly scanned his surroundings.

The soldiers, shouting as they ran back and forth… they were the people. The people of the Kingdom, arriving from villages all over the country to fight this war. Although they didn’t look too reliable as soldiers, that was unavoidable; their hands were meant to hold hoes and shovels.

Protecting them should have been the duty of the ones who ruled over them.

If they handed E-Rantel over, they would be hurting the people who lived within the city, just like the King said.

However—

Gazef recalled the image of Ainz Ooal Gown, wearing his strange mask.

He had returned to Carne Village just after dusk, with no sign of having fought a hard battle.

That was right. The two of them had easily defeated the enemies which had utterly decimated Gazef and his troops.

As expected of the superior being who titled himself the Sorcerer King.

Rather than fight him directly — no, that would only make the people suffer.

“Shit!”

Gazef cursed, unable to find an answer. What should he do? Confusion on the battlefield was a sign of impending death. Even the man hailed as the strongest in the region could still die if he could not focus.

And on top of that, his opponent was Ainz Ooal Gown.

It was true that he hadn’t witnessed the battle which had saved Carne Village. And he himself hadn’t said he’d won, just that he’d chased them off.

But anyone could tell that was a blatant lie.

“Speaking of which… why did he have to lie that they’d run off?”

After Ainz and Albedo had left, he went to the plains where they had fought, but he found no signs of a slaughter. He couldn’t find a single corpse, but burying dozens of bodies would have been very time-consuming. Without bodies —without physical evidence— the statement of “they ran away” gained credence.

However, that was assuming Ainz Ooal Gown had not used magic. Who knew, there might be spells which could teleport bodies away or destroy them.

In addition, Gazef had a hunch.

Although it stemmed purely from his warrior’s instinct, but when he saw the uninjured Ainz return to the village, he could smell the faint scent of death rising up from him.

Rather than say “he let them flee”, it would be more accurate to say “he let them live”.

Because of that, Gazef trusted his instincts over what Ainz had said. There was no basis or evidence for this at all. The bodies of the Sunlight Scripture were nowhere to be found, but they were not dead.

“…I don’t get it…”

The magic caster, who could annihilate without taking a scratch the opponents Gazef had lost to.

How powerful was he? At the very least, Gazef and his warrior band were no match for him.

If a being like that appeared on the battlefield and used his magic, what would happen?

Gazef once more looked at the people, filled with excitement, fear, desperation and frustration.

Between two magic casters using magic of the same tier, the stronger magic caster would naturally be able to bring forth a more powerful spell.

Then, what horrors would result if Ainz Ooal Gown was to cast a ‘Fireball’?

The fathers who had to feed their infant children, the sons who had to support their ailing parents, the youths about to be married, all these people who had left their families behind to come here. How likely was it that they could take an attack like that?

It would be impossible, right?

Nobody could possibly survive when a great magic caster like that raised his hand to strike.

They would be incinerated by fire, frozen solid by ice, or electrocuted by lightning. That was beyond question.

Then, what about Gazef? Could he take it?

He was fairly certain he could take one hit without dying.

However, that sort of thinking might be too naïve.

“Ahhhh… why did it all turn out like this?”

Fighting against Ainz Ooal Gown was a mistake.

Gazef felt that Ainz Ooal Gown was not a monster, given the way he had saved Carne Village. Yet, at the same time, he sensed that he was no ordinary good Samaritan. The impression he had of Ainz was that he would show no mercy to those that opposed him.

What the Kingdom should have done was avoid conflict with him and treat him with politeness. After that, he might have been amenable to selecting a different location.

As Gazef looked out on the people surrounding him, a weighty feeling in his heart, he caught sight of a white-armored youth from the corner of his vision. Along with him was a swordsman who seemed to float lightly on his feet. It was Climb and Brain.

There was a third person behind them, and they were eagerly discussing something.

“Who’s that? I feel like I’ve seen him before… ah! He’s one of the formerly orichalcum-ranked adventurers under Marquis Raeven.”

Because they were all commoners, Gazef was familiar with the former adventurer team, given that they were the ones whom the common folk pinned their hopes on. In some ways, they were his seniors, the ones who had come before him.

The paladin of the Fire God, whose job class excelled in battling evil-aligned monsters, the Evil Slayer, Boris Axelson, aged 41.

The priest of the Wind God, a warrior priest that could hold his own in combat with any fighter, Yorlan Dixgort, aged 46.

The warrior who incorporated dancing swords into his four-sword style, Francen, aged 39.

The scholar who became a magician that had created several magic items bearing his name, Lundquist, aged 45.

And finally, the thief known as ‘The Unseen’, Lockmeyer, aged 40.

Gazef recalled them as he counted them off on his fingers. The one chatting idly with Climb was the thief, Lockmeyer. Speaking of which, he’d apparently worked with Climb and Brain during the demonic disturbance, helping them infiltrate enemy territory to rescue people.

They didn’t seem to have noticed Gazef, but it felt wrong to just barge in like that.

That being said, it would still be rude to not greet them at the very least. Besides, they would all be heading to the battlefield soon. Although the chances of them entering combat were low, given that they would be protecting the King, one never knew what might happen.

—It might be the last time they ever saw each other again.

If possible, he wanted to have a private chat with the two of them. As though the world was granting his wish, Lockmeyer waved to the two of them and departed.

Climb and Brain were left, laughing over something.

During the demonic disturbance in the capital, the bonds between the two of them had grown strong. Be it as friends or disciples or companions, they had built a complex and mutually positive relationship.

And it was because of that relationship that Brain was now a comrade of Climb, a soldier under Princess Renner.

Gazef could not help regretting the fact that he had allowed a warrior who could have rivalled him to be snatched away.

However, he managed to calm down as he watched the two of them.

Gazef smiled as he approached the pair.

Speaking of which, that’s a really flashy suit of armor. It’s still all right in the capital, but on the battlefield he’ll be easy to notice. Should I warn Climb about that?

There were many soldiers on the battlefield, but Climb stood out among them because almost none of them wore full plate armor. On top of that, his armor was painted a bright white. Bowmen would aim at him, and cavalry would use him as a target. Although Climb was somewhat stronger than the average Imperial knight, there were still warriors who were stronger than him. The Four Knights of the Empire were one such example.

If I’m not wrong, Princess Renner gave him that armor… she must not be very familiar with the battlefield if she ordered it painted in that color.

She might be good with tactics, but it would appear she was out of touch with the realities of the battlefield.

If Climb dies, she’ll be sad…

With magic, they could temporarily change the color of the armor, and return it to normal once they returned to the capital.

He approached the two of them from behind while he was thinking of this. Brain turned his face, and his hand reached for the hilt of his katana.

As expected of Brain. He could sense me from a distance like this.

Metal armor made noise when its wearer was in motion.

It would not be strange for people to notice and react to the sound if it drew close to them.

However, there were many people here, all preparing for battle. Under these noisy circumstances, while focusing on making one’s way forward, noticing any other sounds would be very difficult. Of course, a thief with specialized training would be a different matter.

Brain widened his eyes. Then, he glanced at Climb and grinned, as if he had pranked him.

Although Brain seemed to have gotten the wrong idea, this was fine as well.

While smiling the same way Brain did, Gazef drew closer, trying not to make noise as he advanced, slowly shortening the distance between himself and the still-unaware Climb. Although he had not been trained in moving silently and was wearing metal armor, Climb still had not noticed him, and seemed to be discussing something with Brain.

His challenge was to reach the spot directly behind Climb’s back, which he succeeded in doing.

Gazef brought his hand down in a gentle chop, directly onto Climb’s unguarded head.

“Uwah!”

Climb stumbled back while squeaking in a thoroughly unmanly way. As his eyes recognized Gazef, they goggled open.

“This! Isn’t this Strono—”

“—Quiet.”

After Climb swallowed his half-formed words, Gazef continued.

“Quiet. Revealing my identity here will be very troublesome. Just call me Gazef.”

Although he was the Warrior-Captain, many villagers from the rural areas of the Kingdom did not know what he looked like. Who knew, in their imaginations, the Warrior-Captain might be two meters tall, bearing a gigantic sword, and armored in a suit of shining golden plate armor.

Gazef did not want to dash their expectations, and besides, drawing attention would be annoying.

“I-I apologize for my lack of—”

“No, you did nothing wrong,” Gazef said as he interrupted Climb’s apology with a wry grin. Then, the grin took on a new meaning.

“Although, I have to say that you need to be more alert. After all, you did miss someone in full plate armor sneaking up on you. Still, there shouldn’t be any enemies here.”

“What are you saying, Gazef? Being relaxed isn’t necessarily bad. Being wound too tight is.”

“Then, Brain, how did you discover me from so far away?”

“Isn’t that obvious? There was a strange presence in the air.”

Gazef noticed that Climb was looking at Brain and himself with eyes full of surprise.

“Climb, as Princess Renner’s personal guard, you need to be able to sense presences like that. If you miss a hidden assassin, your charge will be hurt.”

“Ah, so that’s what it is. I was wondering what you were up to. Now I see. Climb-kun, if I’m not wrong, you’re using a self-invented style, right? Does that include presence sensing?”

“Ah, no, it doesn’t. I focused on combat techniques. My apologies.”

“I wasn’t scolding you. I just wanted to make sure. To be honest, I used to be like that in the past as well. It’s easy to forget about practicing sensory skills like that when you train by yourself. That’s a dangerous habit. After all, a lot of the time you won’t have a straight fight against an attacker that you know about.”

Gazef’s face was a little red. The look on his face as he glanced at Brain seemed to say, “You didn’t have to tell him that here.”

In the first place, training young warriors was also a duty of the Warrior-Captain. He felt ashamed that he could not accomplish that.

Because Climb had been born a commoner like him, it was important not to let the nobles see them falter while in service to the royal family. For example, if Gazef crushed Climb in a spar, the nobles would whisper that Climb was not worthy of protecting the Princess. Meanwhile, if Gazef stumbled against Climb, they would turn their malicious gossip on him.

That was why he was ashamed of himself; for abandoning the young swordsmen to serve the King, and because he was called a good man even though his deeds were not all that amazing.

No, I shouldn’t feel ashamed. If I have the time to do that, I should—

“—Ah, never mind, I’ll leave it at that. Since you’ve been so kind as to point out Climb’s weaknesses in front of me, I’ll do my best to beat them out of him.”

“Thank you, Gazef-sama.”

“…Would you mind not being so formal? You serve the royal family like I do — that makes you my subordinate. Even so, I have not guided you, and have instead passed that job to someone else. You need not thank someone like that.”

The more Climb thanked him, the guiltier he felt.

“Isn’t that a pain in the ass, being someone with a foot in noble society. People drag you back for pointless things, and you can't even do the things you want."

"Since you're Climb's comrade, protecting Princess Renner alongside him, doesn't that make you one of those people as well?"

"I'm not nearly as tight-assed as they are. Being that princess-dono's flunky or… no. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Being the Princess' guard is only a temporary thing. Once I'm tired of it, I'll move on."

Brain smiled, his expression as cool and clear as the autumn sky. The rain-drenched wreck of a human being Gazef had seen in the capital was nowhere to be seen.

He was envious of how Brain could live in such a free-spirited way.

"Come to think of it, is it alright for you to chat idly with us, Gazef-sama?"

"Well, I'm actually kind of busy right now. I just wanted to take a break… say, are you two free?"

Brain and Climb looked at each other in response to Gazef's question.

"Free… huh."

"Yeah, I guess. Don't have much that needs doing, just prepping my wargear."

"Then, I hope you… right," Gazef said as he looked to one of the watchtowers on the city walls. "Want to head over there?"

Nobody refused, and Gazef led the way.

As the Warrior-Captain, no soldier stopped him. In this way, they made it to the place Gazef had in mind, the place with the best view in the city.

E-Rantel's outermost walls were the highest point in the city Which was to say, they had the best scenery and one could see furthest from there.

And because the air warmed by the many bodies below them did not reach this place, the cool, fresh air brought by the winter wind refreshed their bodies.

“What a great view!”

Climb exclaimed in heartfelt delight as he looked toward the southeast.

“These are the Kattse Plains, right?”

“Correct. They’re shrouded in mist all year round, and the undead wander around there. In a few days, it’ll be our battlefield as well.”

After answering, Gazef took a deep breath and then let it out forcefully. The fresh air filled his body, and he hoped it would drive out the uneasy feelings he had about Ainz Ooal Gown.

“This *is* a magnificent view. It was worth becoming the princess’ subordinate for this. Is this what magicians who can use the ‘Flight’ spell see all the time? No wonder they have so many crazy people among them.”

“Do you think their perspective changed after seeing the wide world?”

“I doubt it. Why don’t you bring a few nobles up here and see it if works? If they don’t change their tune, we’ll chuck them off the side of the wall. Either way, it all works out.”

Gazef smiled wryly at Brain’s joke. If people could be changed this way, he would drag them over in chains if need be.

Climb looked like he did not know how to respond, which made Gazef feel better.

“Ha… Coming here with you guys was the right thing to do. I feel relieved now.”

“Well, that’s good to hear. Then… why did you call us out here? Are you sure nobody’s watching us? Don’t tell me you gathered three strapping men together just to look at the scenery? Or is there someone you want dead?”

Brain’s sudden surge of aggression perturbed Gazef.

“Well, I guess I won’t be able to protect the Princess and it’ll be a shame to not be able to train Climb any more… but Gazef, I owe you. I’ll do any dirty deed you want with a smile on my face.”

Brain wasn’t kidding. The look in his eyes was serious.

“It’s nothing like that, Brain. I don’t want you to do that sort of thing.”

“…You do know my hands aren’t exactly spotless, right?”

“Indeed, they aren’t. Brain, your sword was quenched in blood. However, so was mine.”

“In your case, it was the blood of the Kingdom’s enemies, right? I’m the result of my own desires, and the blood I’ve shed is nothing like yours.”

“…Are you trying to atone for your sins?”

“No, nothing like that. I’ve done all sorts of things to beat you. I dedicated my life to it. But even after finding out that the goal I’ve been working toward is nothing special, I don’t feel any guilt for what I’ve done. But because you were kind to me, I want to return the favor. That’s all there is — don’t think too much about it.”

“Then, my request is that you not think of doing such things. Besides, what did you mean by ‘kind to you’? Was it when we met again in the Capital?”

Brain’s answer was a bitter smile.

“Don’t worry about it, I just felt like you helped me out.”

“The more you tell me not to worry about it, the more I end up worrying about it…”

In the face of this unyielding refusal, Gazef decided to change the topic.

“Ah, speaking of which, you do know I had no particular reason for bringing you here, right?”

“Eh?”

Climb spoke, but Brain merely raised an eyebrow.

“…I was just thinking that it would be good for the three of us to have a chat while we had some free time, and that this was the only place where I could take my time to talk without worrying about what others would think of me. If we were in the capital, we could have a quiet drink too.”

“What, that’s really it? I thought you had some secret orders for me…”

“No, it’s not like that. How shall I put it…”

We could die at any time on the battlefield, and this could be the last time we see each other. Yet, how could he say such inauspicious things?

“Never mind. Oh, that’s right, Climb, that armor is extraordinarily distinctive. Wouldn’t it be better to paint it a different color? As it is, you might become a priority target on the battlefield.”

“I’m sorry, Stronoff-sama, I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

Climb’s quiet refusal was delivered with an iron determination.

“When I wear this distinctive armor and achieve excellence on the battlefield, I will bring credit to Princess Renner. In addition, many of the nobles know I wear white armor. If I change its color because I fear death, I will become the butt of jokes for them, and it will reflect badly on the Princess as well. Rather than that, I would prefer to meet my fate bravely on the battlefield, and serve her in death as well as in life.”

As he looked into Climb’s eyes, Gazef swallowed the words he wanted to say.

“*Princess Renner doesn’t want you to die.*”

“*Don’t confuse bravery and foolhardiness.*”

“*Endure a little hardship now for a better future.*”

He had prepared all these lines beforehand, but none of them were persuasive enough to change Climb’s mind.

It was as Climb said. His armor was like Princess Renner’s flag. His heroic actions would improve her standing, and conversely, shameful actions would stain her reputation as well.

Climb had been saved by Princess Renner, and in his heart was the notion that “my life belongs to the Princess”. Gazef had no way to shake that kind of conviction.

It was the same sort of thing as his loyalty to the King, and therefore—

“I would gladly throw my life away for Princess Renner.”

Gazef had no idea how to respond to the youth who had already made up his mind.

“Oi, oi, oi. Why’re you saying this like you’re going to die at any time? Don’t worry, Gazef, I’ll keep an eye on Climb. I won’t let him do anything stupid. No matter what kind of trouble he gets into, I’ll pull him out of it.”

“If it were only the Four Knights of the Empire, there’s no question you’d win, Brain. However… against that man, Ainz Ooal Gown… I fear even you would lose your life.”

“…Is Ainz Ooal Gown really that powerful? Ah, I remember you mentioned him before at your place.”

After the demonic disturbance, Gazef and Brain had discussed how their lives had gone ever since the grand tournament over wine. That was how Ainz' name had come up.

“I can confidently say no Imperial knight can beat you. The Four Knights, strong as they are, will be no match for you. Even if the Empire’s mightiest magic caster, Fluder Paradyne, took the field, you could probably escape if luck was with you. But against Ainz Ooal Gown-dono… Brain, I’m sorry, but your life will end there.”

“That strong, huh. How powerful is he, really?”

“…All I can say, Brain, is that he’s beyond your imagination. And then you can take whatever you imagine after that and multiply that by a few times.”

“Well, if he’s that strong… I wonder if he could stand against Sebas-sama?”

“Sebas? Is that the old man Climb was speaking of? Although that old gent does seem to be astonishingly powerful, I still feel Gown-dono would be stronger than him.”

“I find that hard to believe, personally. I honestly can’t imagine anyone could be stronger than Sebas-sama… but more importantly, why do you address an enemy with such respect?”

“He is a worthy enemy. Although, saying that would be troublesome for the King, given the person of whom I speak.”

Brain shrugged.

“You’ve done a great deal for us, Warrior-Captain-sama. Climb-kun, you’ve done your fair share for the Kingdom. As for me, I’m okay with anything. That air-headed Princess-sama is really too kind for her own good.”

Words like those suited Brain well. However, his attitude toward the royal family couldn’t be dismissed just like that.

Although the Gazef Stronoff who was a loyal vassal of the King might have knotted his brows in annoyance, the Gazef Stronoff who was a warrior would only laugh at the man’s boldness.

If someone else were watching, he would have had to scold Brain, but right now, only the three of them were here. That meant that he only needed to be his warrior-self now.

“Although it’s true Princess Renner is too free… well, enough of that. I’ll understand if Climb doesn’t want to repaint his armor. Then, please take care of yourselves.”

“I’m extremely grateful for the concern everyone has shown me. However, Princess Renner told me before that I would need to work hard to match this suit of armor. So, although I am very sorry I cannot meet your wishes, I will not be changing my mind.”

“Is that so? Then I guess that’ll do.”

The cool wind blew past the three of them. The sky was a nearly-translucent shade of blue. It didn’t feel like a war was about to break out at all. Against this backdrop, Gazef saw Climb, with a serious look on his face. As he thought about not letting too many people die, his heart was filled with joy and sadness.

As though to wipe these feelings away, Gazef decided to change the topic.

“Speaking of which, what were you two talking about just now?”

Brain and Climb looked at each other, and then Brain spoke for them.

“Well, you know we’re not like you, we’re free, to some extent. So anyway, I was the one who started it. Climb was just following me around. Though there was one more person, Lockmeyer, I had him show us around. And we were planning to look up the messiah of the capital, that adamantite-ranked adventurer. We heard he was based in this city, so we decided to visit him.”

“Oh, Momon-dono, am I correct?”

“Right, right, that’s him. I saw him in passing in the capital. I heard them calling him the mightiest warrior ever—”

Here Brain’s attitude changed. He was more serious now.

“—So I wanted to discuss some things with him.”

“Discuss?”

Gazef repeated the word like a parrot learning to speak.

Brain’s expression was hard to read.

“About that vampire. Shalltear Bloodfallen.”

Shalltear Bloodfallen.

The almighty vampire, who had shattered the spirit of Brain Unglaus, Gazef’s rival.

She was a monster that humanity could not defeat, and she had appeared in the Capital.

Brain thought she might have had something to do with Jaldabaoth, but—

“…Did you know there was another vampire here, Henyupenyuko, who was defeated by an exotic magic item used by Momon-dono? Apparently, a part of the forest was destroyed by a large explosion, and when Momon-dono returned, his armor was covered in the signs of a great battle.”

Gazef had heard that much from the Mayor.

“Ah, yes, I’ve heard of it too. That’s why I wanted to speak with him. To begin with, in my opinion, Shalltear Bloodfallen is a being that not even an adamantite-ranked adventurer could beat. And not that I suspect him or anything, but I wanted to ask if he dealt it a fatal blow. And I was also interested in Henyupenyuko as well.”

“You mean, there might be other vampires like that around?”

“That’s right, Climb-kun. From what I’ve learned, Momon is chasing two vampires. I wanted to confirm if they’re Henyupenyuko and Shalltear.”

“And then what happened?”

“Well, about that…”

Brain shrugged.

“Unfortunately, he wasn’t around. He was out of the city because of a request. I have no idea when he’s coming back.”

“Well, that is a shame. I didn’t have any luck either. I didn’t have a chance to speak with Momon-dono. If I had some time, I'd like to talk to him. If nothing else, I'd like to thank him for saving the Capital."

"Is that so? Then… after this war's over, why don't we go together? If we're lucky, we'll be able to see him. Climb-kun, want to come with us?"

"I would love to!"

"Marvellous. Well, it looks like I have something to look forward to after this war's over. An adamantite-ranked warrior. I'll be able to learn a lot, I'll bet."

"Indeed. We'll definitely learn something. What kind of enemies he's fought with… I look forward to hearing about his deeds of valor!"

"Well, this is unexpected. Gazef, you like this sort of thing?"

"Ah, yes. After all, I am a warrior; it's only natural that I'd be interested… So you'd better come back safe, all right?"

Gazef turned his eyes toward the Kattse Plain.

“There’s a tavern in the Capital with excellent food. Once this war is over, we’ll go there to celebrate. The money I saved up is meant for times like that.”

“Let’s hope we’re going there to celebrate victory.”

Brain walked up to Gazef’s side, and looked in the same direction as him.

“Then, well, about that… could I come too?”

“Climb-kun, can you drink?”

Although the Kingdom’s laws did not technically set a legal age for drinking, nobody would sell alcohol to a boy of fifteen.

“No, I haven’t, so I’m not sure.”

“Is that so? Well, then you should drink a little and see. There may come a time when you need to drink with others, like now.”

“Indeed. It might be good to try drinking for the first time before that.”

“I understand! Then, I hope you will let me accompany you.”

“Good! Then, may the three of us return here safely. Don’t lose your lives without a good reason!”

Brain and Climb nodded in response to Gazef’s words.

Part 4

A crimson expanse. A barren wasteland, devoid of almost all vegetation. A bloody land of death.

The Kattse Plains — a place where the undead and other monsters wandered, feared as a place that was inimical to life.

The most dangerous thing was the thin mist that wrapped around its monsters no matter the time of the day. This fog carried faint traces of the energies which caused undead reactions.

By itself, the mist did nothing to living creatures. It did not absorb life energy, nor was it harmful. However, because the mist registered as an undead creature to spells, it produced false positive reactions which foiled attempts to detect other undead beings, and as a result many adventurers had been ambushed by undead while inside it.

However, there was no mist now. Visibility was excellent and one could see a long way. It was as though the land was welcoming the combatants of the upcoming war onto itself as future undead.

The undead had dispersed with the fog, and none of them could be seen. There were no living creatures present, and a deathly silence reigned over the plains.

Collapsed towers, built hundreds of years ago, jutted out from the earth like scattered tombstones. Of course, none of them was intact.

The towers were originally six floors high, but everything above the third floor had collapsed, and the debris was everywhere. Less than half of the thick walls were left. The cause was not so much weathering as battles between monsters.

Scenes like these existed side by side with normal grass-covered plains, separated only by an invisible line. This was why the Kattse Plains were called cursed land.

The sun shone on the land which had not seen its light for nearly a year. As though to look down on this piece of unhallowed domain, a vast structure loomed high on the other side of the land — the world of the living.

It was built with huge logs that were nowhere to be found on the surrounding plains, with sturdy walls that seemed to deny passage to everything in its vicinity. It was ringed by shallow ditches that were nevertheless carefully excavated and filled with sharpened stakes. This was to ward against unintelligent undead.

On the other side of the ditch flew countless flags. Of these, the most numerous were the Empire’s flags — bearing the insignia of the Baharuth Empire.

That was only to be expected. After all, this building, this castrum, was the Imperial Army’s Kattse Plain garrison base.

The Empire had mobilized 60'000 knights for this operation. The garrison could house all of them, which itself spoke volumes about the base’s size. And this formidable castrum, as mighty as a fortress, was built on a piece of easily defended terrain.

It was built on top of a hill. This hill was not native to the Kattse Plains, but built up entirely through magical landscaping.

Even the Baharuth Empire, which used magic casters as a part of their national defense, could not complete work like this in a short time. This structure had been built over a period of several years.

Originally, this place was intended to be the starting point of invasions targeting E-Rantel. That was to say, this massive castrum had been built with the intention of withstanding an extended siege by the Kingdom’s hundreds of thousands of troops.

The Kingdom had no answer to the creation of this castrum, simply because they had no spare manpower or resources to attack the garrison.

Although they would unite when the Empire invaded their own country, when it came to launching an invasion, there were several problems to consider — that each faction had their own things to worry about besides invasion, that they would not gain usable land, and that whoever did this would be paying for the invasion out of their own pockets.

In the end, none of the nobles would bother unless they were in the line of fire.

Three griffons flew in the skies above that massive castrum. They began with a wide aerial orbit, followed by a slow descent. Any knight would know that this was the way a unit of the ‘Imperial Air Guard’ — troops under the Emperor’s direct command — saluted while in flight, which was to say their ceremonial descent was meant to show that emissaries of the Empire had arrived.

On the surface, there were around ten mounted knights in a circular formation, each raising the Imperial flag. This was the return of the salute from the ground — the ceremony for welcoming an Imperial agent. The griffins landed in the center of the circle, and the accuracy of the landing was a test of the riders’ skills, but all three passed with flying colors, which showed the excellence of their ability.

After landing, the Imperial emissaries revealed themselves. Although these knights were tasked with maintaining the appropriate gravitas during these ceremonial welcomes, their surprise at the oddity of these emissaries surprised them to the point where the flags they were holding wavered.

The reason for this wavering was the man who was dressed in a manner completely unlike the other two people accompanying him.

Once he removed his helmet and revealed his handsome features, everyone immediately knew who he was.

His blond hair was slightly tossed by the wind, and his eyes were as blue as the sea. His mouth, which suggested an iron will, was tightly shut. He was the picture of the perfect knight.

There was nobody who didn’t know who this knight was.

More importantly, there was nobody who didn’t know about the armor he wore. It was made of the rare metal adamantite, and further enchanted into a suit of magic full plate armor. There were only a few suits of armor like this in the Empire.

The wearer of this armor was one of the highest-ranking knights in the Empire.

One of the Empire’s Four Knights, “Gale” Nimble Ark dale Anock.

In a gallant voice that matched the image he projected, Nimble addressed one of the knights.

“I seek your commander, General Kabein of the Second Legion. Do you know where he is?

“Sir! General Kabein is in a meeting now to plan the offensive against the Kingdom! I will have Anock-sama escorted to the General’s praetorium!”

“I see. Then… has Sorcerer King Gown-dono arrived here as well?”

“Sir! No sir! The Sorcerer King-dono has not been sighted here.”

“Understood.”

Since word had been sent and had arrived faster than him, Nimble sighed in relief.

“Then, may I ask you to lead the way? There is a matter that I must entrust to him.”

Nimble slowly closed his hands around something concealed in a breast pocket.

♦ ♦ ♦

Nimble was brought to a luxurious tent, where he waited for almost an hour, in the company of numerous guards, until the owner of the tent returned.

He was a middle-aged man whose hair was pure white, and he had a kindly air about him.

Although he was armored like all the other knights, he gave off a completely different impression from them. One could say that he looked like a noble, rather than a soldier.

“Welcome, Nimble.”

The smile on his face made him seem even more like a noble than a knight. His voice was gentle, far too out of place on a grim place like the battlefield.

Nimble responded in the approved ceremonial fashion.

Natel Inyem dale Kabein.

He was a noble who had lost his chance to get ahead in the peerage, but he had been recognized by the previous Emperor for his talents, and placed in command of the Second Legion. Although he was not possessed of martial valor as a person, he was famed for his ability to command, with rumors saying that he had never lost a battle. With him in command, the Second Legion enjoyed very high morale.

The knights accompanying Kabein were unable to hide their respect for him.

“I do not know how to begin thanking the general-dono, who came all this way to see me even though he is the supreme commander of this expedition.”

The Imperial Army was divided into eight legions, and every legion’s commanding officer was bestowed the title of “general”. The general of the First Legion was known as the Field Marshal, and he was the commander-in-chief of the entire Imperial Army.

If the First Legion — if the Field Marshal was not present, the general of the next legion would assume his position as the overall commanding officer. That was to say, General Kabein of the Second Legion was in command of the entire Imperial Army.

“No, no, Nimble. Dispense with the formalities. You’re here on his Imperial Majesty’s orders, right? You’re not under my command. You need only speak to me as an equal.”

Even as he said that, Nimble smiled bitterly.

The Imperial Army was loyal first to the Emperor, and then the generals.

The Empire’s Four Knights, its strongest fighters, would often be tasked with carrying out the Emperor’s will. In terms of authority, they would be considered equal to a general. However, in terms of age, experience and prestige, none of them were equal to Kabein. It would be difficult for them to be equal when an outsider was present.

Kabein smiled, as though he relished the disquiet on Nimble’s face.

“It itches at me that one of the Four Knights, the Empire’s mightiest warriors, should be so stiff and formal around an old man like myself. How about just dispensing with the honorifics?”

“Understood, General Kabein.”

General Kabein nodded, as though to indicate his approval.

“Although, you picked a good time to come. The mist has dispersed, as though welcoming you.”

“General Kabein, I think the welcome is not for me, but for the tragedy that is about to unfold. I shudder to imagine what will happen.”

“A tragedy, hm… Well, then, Nimble. Can you tell me what this war is meant to accomplish? Until now, our strategic objective has been to exhaust the Kingdom, but this time round, it’s different. Our current objective is to take E-Rantel by diplomatic means, and for that we will need to comprehensively defeat the Kingdom in battle.”

Kabein’s eyes hardened as he said this.

“…We face the largest army the Kingdom has ever mustered in recorded history. Although our knights are more than a match for any of the conscripts the Kingdom can field, said conscripts will be fielded in overwhelming numbers. An open field battle will result in many casualties. And all of this is for the purpose of seizing E-Rantel, which we will then immediately hand over to this Sorcerer King fellow. What is his Imperial Majesty thinking?”

“Before I answer this question, I hope you will dismiss everyone present.”

The old general opened his mouth as if to speak, then nodded his head instead.

“All of you are dismissed.”

Kabein’s vassals bowed as they retreated.

“Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Wasting time would be foolish. Now, can you tell me why?”

“Yes. I was originally dispatched to inform the Field Marshal of the objective of this war.”

Nimble shifted himself in his seat.

“The objective of this war is to build good relations with the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown. As such, we are to obtain E-Rantel by any cost in lives, and then relinquish it at no cost to Ainz Ooal Gown, in order to strengthen the ties with both sides.”

“And so we will bleed dry the knight corps who protect our Empire, thus plunging it into danger, in addition to handing over E-Rantel. Is the Sorcerer King really worth all that?”

“Yes.”

Kabein clasped his hands over his heart and closed his eyes. Then he answered.

“I understand. If this is his Imperial Majesty’s desire, then I shall carry it out.”

“You have my utmost gratitude.”

“There is no need for gratitude… though the approval of the Sorcerer King is another matter.”

“About that, I have a request,” Nimble said.

This was his main aim for coming here.

“We will request the Sorcerer King to cast a spell to begin the attack. I would ask you delay the knights’ charge until after that spell.”

“And what does that mean? Are we not supposed to buy the Sorcerer King’s sympathy with our blood?”

“Indeed, that is the idea. However, we also intend to investigate the power of the Sorcerer King. As such, we intend to have the Sorcerer King use the most powerful spell he is capable of. His Imperial Majesty has asked for this in order to see what manner of magic that might be.”

“…So, the Sorcerer King… he is an enemy?”

“You seem to understand. The Sorcerer King —Ainz Ooal Gown— is an enemy of the Empire.”

“If that is the case, then I will have the knights charge the breach created by the Sorcerer King’s spell in order to widen it. But what kind of spell will that be? I hope it’s not a simple ‘Fireball’!”

“It is as you say. We must find out what he is capable of. However, we can probably assume it is more powerful than Paradyne-sama’s attack magic.”

Kabein’s eyes widened, but that was only for a moment.

“I see, I see. Although I find it hard to believe anyone could be more powerful than that mighty magic caster, but if he really possesses that sort of power, I can see why his Imperial Majesty would want to build good relations with him.”

Nimble remained silent.

“Slaying hundreds in a single stroke would be a mighty blow. It would be a good chance for a penetrating charge. With that kind of power at our side, we would take fewer losses.”

If only that were all, Nimble thought.

After speaking with his fellow members of the Four Knights, “Heavy Explosion” and “Lightning Bolt”, he realised that Ainz' power surpassed mortal imagination. He might be able to use a spell that slew thousands, perhaps tens of thousands if they were densely packed. Although that sounded suspicious to him, if the two of them had similar opinions, there was a high chance that it was true.

Just as Kabein said, losing the knights which policed the Empire would be a huge loss.

While it would be a joyous occasion if Ainz, their latent enemy, turned out to be toothless, just this once, he wanted to believe what his comrades had said.

“Ah, General. There’s another thing I want to ask you. The Sorcerer King will be bringing his troops to the front. I hope you will allow them to accompany you to the battlefield.”

“I see. How many thousand men does he have?”

“About that—”

“Forgive me for interrupting your conversation, Kabein-dono, Nimble-dono!”

A great cry rose from the knight outside the tent.

Kabein looked apologetically to Nimble, before speaking to the man outside.

“Enter.”

The man who came in was a senior knight.

“What’s going on? Is it an emergency?”

“Sir! A carriage flying the flag of the Sorcerer King has arrived at the main gate. They request entry. Do we have permission to let them in?”

The knight’s eyes turned to Nimble, and then to Kabein. He nodded to Nimble.

“…Understood, let them through.”

“Sir! Then… do we need to inspect the carriage?”

Nobody could enter the garrison without being cleared by the sentries. The normal procedure was to use magic to check the personnel in question, to ensure they weren’t intruders disguised by illusions.

If this were the Kingdom, they would not have used magic for inspections. The reason why it was used here was because magic was a cornerstone of the Empire’s might. They were aware of the terrifying power of magic, and were thus vigilant against its use.

This was especially true for a huge military base like this which employed the latest magical technology. If these technologies were leaked, it might cause great harm to the Empire. Were Emperor Jircniv to show up in person, he would still be closely scrutinized by the guards.

As a result, even if the visitors were from an allied country — no, precisely because they were from an allied country, they would be subject to inspection.

However, there were situations where such things would not be allowed.

Kabein glanced to Nimble again.

Weighed down by the oppressive atmosphere and the power of the item at his breast, Nimble could only smile bitterly in response.

“General Kabein, my apologies. They are extremely important guests to the Empire. As an exception among exceptions, permit them to enter as they are.”

Kabein’s face, which had borne a warm smile until recently, froze into an emotionless mask.

Nimble had given an order which superseded his own authority.

No matter how kind a man was, he wouldn’t be happy if his own people were given orders by someone else.

Nimble understood the reason for Kabein’s aggravation, but that was an order he had to give.

Otherwise—

While Nimble was hesitating about whether to reveal the item he was concealing in his breast pocket, General Kabein spoke up.

"If it is the Emperor's command, then we must obey. After all, the Empire and all within it are under the command of his Imperial Majesty."

"I am very glad you understand, General."

The object Nimble was holding onto was an imperial decree. It was written on parchment, and said that the bearer was empowered to act with the full authority of the Emperor. Its remit extended to everyone involved within this war. Within this war, Nimble would outrank Kabein, and would be able to decide the fate of the General as required.

For a moment, Nimble was relieved because he would not have to ruin the relationship between an elder officer that he respected. Then he tensed up again, because now was not the time to relax.

"Then, shall we go meet this Sorcerer King? After all he has received much favor from his Imperial Majesty, so surely he must be a man who can rival the great heroes."

Personally, Nimble did not wish to go.

After speaking to the other Four Knights —no, now they were only three, including himself— and remembering what they had said to him, Nimble's expression turned bitter. However, he had no choice but to follow the General.

"Of course, General. Do allow me to walk with you."

Outside the garrison, a magnificent carriage advanced, heralded by knights. What made onlookers gasp was the fact that the carriage had no driver, and that it was not pulled by an ordinary horse, but a monster which looked like a scaled horse.

Nimble addressed the surrounding knights and Kabein.

"Please present arms to our guest."
<TL: Highest form of military salutation, reserved for senior officers and high ranking dignitaries.>

What? Nimble could imagine that was what all the soldiers and Kabein were thinking, given the expressions on their faces.

Diplomatically speaking, presenting arms to the heads of state of allied powers was basic common sense.

However, that common sense did not exist in military installations. To begin with, nobody would welcome foreign dignitaries in a military base.

Even within human nations, there would be squabbles and infighting. Nobody would be that open-minded.

Presenting arms to an outsider was something which should be done in a safe, open place, and not in a military installation. That was what the soldiers present must have been thinking.

There was another point.

It also meant that presenting arms would never take place on the battlefield.

This is because soldiers might think that the person their commanding officer was presenting arms to was superior even to him. That was one of the unspoken rules of the battlefield.

As one of the Four Knights, Nimble understood their feelings perfectly. However—

“Gentlemen, please present your arms.”

Nimble repeated himself in a voice which was underpinned by steel.

After that, he heard Kabein sigh.

“You heard the man, didn’t you? Present arms as the Sorcerer King approaches.”

Kabein’s orders calmed the disquieted soldiers. If it was an order, then all they had to do was follow. There was no need to think too much about it.

Nimble shot a thankful look at Kabein, but as he did, he noticed a pained expression on Kabein’s face. It seemed to say *it might be hard on you, but it’s even harder on me*.

The carriage stopped before them.

Nimble gasped, for more than one reason.

The first was because the carriage itself was breathtakingly beautiful. Its base color was a black that seemed to have been cut from the night sky itself, highlighted elaborate decorations which covered the entire chassis of the vehicle. Said decorations had the subdued radiance of pure gold and bronze, giving the whole an elegant, classy air. Although the embellishments might have been a little overdone, it did not reach the point of tackiness. Instead, it resembled nothing so much as a giant treasure box.

Nimble had ridden the Emperor’s personal carriage on occasion, and he was of the firm opinion that the one before him made the Emperor’s look like a haywagon.

The other reason which so surprised him was the beast pulling the carriage. It was a beast, because there was no way it could have been a mere horse. The creature gurgled softly, a liquid “gururururu” sound, and its sharp teeth could be seen in the slight opening of its mouth. Its entire body was covered in scales that seemed to belong to a reptile, and underneath those scales were prominent, rippling bands of muscle.

It was like a horse-shaped avatar of brutality and violence.

Everyone around it was filled with an acute sense of alarm.

Nimble himself was starting to hyperventilate, and sweat broke out on his back and palms. The beast was that terrifying.

Amidst the storm of panicked breaths, the carriage’s door opened.

A dark elf girl alighted.

All thinking ground to a halt.

Nobody could speak. Their eyes were drawn irresistibly to her.

The girl holding her twisted black staff was adorable. When she grew up, she would surely break many hearts. Her beauty would be such that men would do anything for her. Even her demure expression was like a flower blossoming under the moonlight.

However, the things on her hands were utterly incongruous with the image she projected.

They were gauntlets.

The left gauntlet was an evil-looking thing that resembled the hand of a demon. It seemed to be made out of some sort of black metal, which was covered in twisted thorns. Its fingertips were sharpened into points, and the dirty radiance surrounding it resembled some sort of strange secretion. Just a single look filled all who saw it with a terror stemming from the depths of their souls.

In contrast, the right gauntlet looked like the pure, immaculate hand of a maiden. It was white in color and its slender proportions were covered in elaborate gold embroidery, which further emphasized its exquisite beauty. It drew the eye like bees to honey, and just like seeing a world-class beauty, the onlookers felt like they might lose their souls to it.

“A-Ah, Ainz-sama. I think we’ve arrived.”

“Have we now. Thank you, Mare.”

With that, another figure revealed itself.

In that moment, the air suddenly turned heavy and somber.

The bodies of every man present were covered in goosebumps. This was not hostility, but a feeling that was harder to describe.

Ainz Ooal Gown was dressed in the trappings that one would associate with an arcane magic caster. To begin with, he wore a jet-black robe, and on top of that, another black cloak, which was doubly curious. He held a staff, which was not as lavishly decorated as one might expect it to be. Around his neck was a silver necklace set with a gemstone. And on his face was a strange mask.

“We bid you and your entourage welcome, your Majesty, Sorcerer-King Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Nimble lowered his head. However, he didn’t hear anyone else following suit.

Despite knowing it was very rude, he had to turn behind to look.

The general and knights behind him were frozen in place. They had been utterly overwhelmed by the Sorcerer-King’s presence and could not move.

That much he could understand. However, if this went on, it wouldn’t turn out well.

In the end, it was the general who delivered the solution to Nimble’s predicament.

“Legion!”

The roar belonged to Kabein. It was a crisp, bracing command that didn’t seem to suit a noble like himself, but which fitted his rank as a general perfectly.

“A salute! To his Majesty, the Sorceror King!”

“Sir!”

The knights chorused their reply, and as one, they presented their arms to Ainz.

“I thank you for your welcome, you knights who are the pride of the Empire.”

It was a thoroughly mundane response, which made it that much more frightening. It felt like something monstrous was trying its best to act like a human being. Having heard of the face underneath the mask, Nimble experienced that sensation even more acutely than the others.

“Please raise your heads.”

The first time he said it, nobody responded.

“Can you not raise your heads?”

After the second time, they complied. After all, waiting until the third time was an honor only granted to one’s own ruler.

“Your Majesty, please forgive those who did not immediately raise their heads.”

A quick glance across the knights revealed that their lips were white and their faces were pale.

“They were so excited to see your Majesty that they forgot themselves.”

“No, I should be the one to apologize. I was excited because we would be heading to the battlefield. I hope you understand that I hold none of you at fault.”

Ainz cast off the black cape on his shoulders. The jet-black fabric flapped like a raven’s wings as it spread open. In that moment, the cold, oppressive air that surrounded him vanished like it had never been.

All that was left was an ordinary human being, with the presence of an ordinary human being.

It was frightening.

That was the emotion Nimble felt most keenly now.

He had heard of Ainz' monstrous nature from his comrades. Even so, the man standing in front of him seemed too ordinary, which only deepened his fear. He felt like a large predator was slowly drawing close to him.

The knights, who knew nothing, were probably beginning to sense the oddity of the situation. The air filled with a growing disquiet. Kabein seemed to understand. He didn’t use his mind, but his heart and soul. Through them he knew what sort of attitude he should hold toward the person in front of him.

“Please allow me, Nimble Ark dale Anock, to lead you to our field camp.”

“Is that so. Well, although I feel I have given you trouble, I am in your care.”

“Understood. Then, this is the commander-in-chief of this expedition, General Kabein.”

“I am Kabein, your Majesty. If you are inconvenienced by anything in this garrison, please inform me and we will immediately rectify it. Please, take your pick of the knights here to be your attendants…”

“There is no need for that. I have a subordinate here.”

He gestured to the dark elf girl.

“And I will provide for myself in case of any insufficiency.”

Kabein froze.

His true intention had been to assign minders to Ainz in order to keep him from doing anything strange in the base.

Yet, the answer had been a flat denial, an answer only the powerful could give.

However, given Kabein’s circumstances, he could not allow this sort of thing to happen. At this rate, they would never come to a consensus.

Although Nimble obviously supported Kabein, he could not leave this matter be.

“Is that so… your Majesty, please feel free to inform us if you require anything at all. General Kabein, I hope you will allow me to handle things from here.”

“—Understood.”

“Ah… there’s something I forgot to mention.”

“What’s the matter, your Majesty?”

“I believe that I am to open this battle with a spell. In that moment, I would like to have my troops participate in the battle as well. I hope you will permit this.”

“We could ask for nothing more.”

Since it had already been discussed, Kabein promptly acquiesced.

Yet, an unknowable impulse made him wrinkle his brow.

“…However, the battle will commence in several days, perhaps as early as tomorrow. From whence shall your forces arrive, your Majesty? We cannot wait too long…”

“That will not be a problem. They are already nearby.”

The answer raised doubts in Nimble’s heart. Looking at the sky, there didn’t seem to be any airborne troops approaching.

Kabein must have had the same suspicions as him. Naturally, the garrison was surrounded by an extensive security net. The approach of anyone apart from Imperial troops would be immediately reported to general-ranked personnel. Could it be that a report had been lost?

Nimble looked around, but it didn’t seem like anyone present knew anything about it.

“My apologies. No, saying they’re nearby would be a problem. Well, I just wanted to say they can arrive immediately.”

“What…?”

He still had questions, but he put them aside as Kabein continued asking, “How many troops will be coming?”

“Around five hundred.”

“Five hundred…”

Although Kabein hid his reaction masterfully, Nimble could not conceal his own disappointment.

“General, will there be a problem integrating his Majesty’s unit with the Imperial Army?”

In order to demonstrate their loyalty to Ainz, the Empire had to shed oceans of its peoples’ blood. As such, Ainz' unit would have no chance to deploy, so putting them into the Imperial Army’s formation would be fine.

“If it’s just five hundred, then we won’t even have to rearrange our formation. As for the Sorcerer-King’s honor guard, perhaps we should leave that duty to his subordinate.”

He was trying to say, “Don’t be so eager to rush into the fray.” The Imperial army would have to go in first and take losses in order to prove their sincerity to Ainz, so letting Ainz' unit do too much would be troublesome.

Ainz nodded in acceptance of Nimble’s suggestion. Nimble sighed in relief, but when he thought about it calmly, that shouldn’t be logical. What could a mere five hundred troops do? In all likelihood they were merely an ornamental escort.

However, what happened next far exceeded Nimble’s predictions.

Having cast some kind of spell, Ainz seemed to be talking into thin air.

“Can you hear me— Shalltear? Open a ‘Gate’ to my position and then send the troops over.”

The eyes under Ainz' mask seemed to move.

“Good. General, I have summoned my unit.”

As he finished saying that, space warped.

A black, hemispherical object appeared behind Ainz' back.

Nimble remembered something about a ‘Gate’ being mentioned earlier.

The gate opened, and what came forth was—

The world went silent.

A strange absence of sound filled the surroundings. A wave of quiescence surged forth.

The five hundred troops revealed their forms. Compared to the 60'000-strong Imperial army, they were far too few. However, nobody could look down on these five hundred soldiers.

The unit of monstrous soldiers before them made that clear with their power.

“These are my troops.”

Before the silent audience, Ainz introduced his forces.

Intermission

In a small but luxurious room, a young girl sat on a throne. She spoke in a voice that was very innocent and cute, and which was quite fitting for her age.

“Okie, I’m counting on you then!”

“Yes, your Majesty! I won’t fail you!”

The man who looked like a knight rose from where he was kneeling and elegantly left the room.

After the door had been closed for a while, the girl then asked the minister at her side.

“Is it okay now?”

“Yes, he was the last person, so it's fine.”

After hearing the minister's cold words, the girl's innocent expression suddenly crumbled.

Perhaps it was because of fatigue, but her eyes clouded over and narrowed, while her mouth formed a ^ shape and her shoulders drooped.

“So tiring.”

Her attitude and tone was that of a 40-year old woman, but her voice still sounded young and cute, which was at odds with her appearance.

“You’ve worked hard.”

“Yes, I have, so can I stop putting on this appearance now?” The girl pulled up her skirt while saying this. “I could do without this skirt that shows off the full length of my legs as well.”

“I have told you many times before, but you can’t, your Majesty.”

The girl was the queen of the Draconic Kingdom, “Black Scale Dragon Lord” Draudiron Oriucrus.

Even though she was called a Dragon Lord, her fighting ability was no greater than that of a normal person. However the Slane Theocracy still considered her to be a Dragon Lord because of the unique ability she was born with, the extremely rare ability which was the difference between a true Dragon Lord and an impostor.

She could use Wild Magic, the proof of power which distinguished a true Dragon Lord from a false one.

“As long as your appearance can evoke the desire in others to protect you, they will work harder.”

“Are all humans lolicons? I would feel more comfortable if certain parts of me were bigger.”

Draudiron put both of her hands on her flat chest and squeezed.

“Yes, if it was that form...”

“—Don't speak of it like a form! That is my real appearance!”

“I apologize for my disrespectful words, your Majesty.”

“Oi, that hardly sounds like an apology.”

“That is not so.”

After staring at the minister's cold smile for a while, Draudiron realized that she would not be able to break down that expression of his, and she turned away in displeasure.

“Back to the topic, that form may be popular with men, but not so much with women. Instead, your present form appeals to men and women of all ages. So if you want to change back to that form, you will have to wait until the country is stable again. Or do you have any other plans to propose?”

“Don't speak of it as a form....”

“However, if the situation continues like this, whatever form you take will not matter anymore.”

A heavy silence fell for a while as they contemplated the current situation of the Draconic Kingdom. .

“The beastman invasion this time seems totally different from how they’ve always been.”

“Indeed. Their army's motive this time does not appear to be small scale skirmishes, but the complete destruction of this country, followed by turning it into a livestock ranch.”

There was a beastman kingdom near the Draconic Kingdom.

Said beastmen were demi-humans similar to various carnivorous animals such as tigers and lions, but bipedal. Just looking at their faces would tell you that they were carnivorous, and they preferred human meat.

Man-eating races were quite common. Three out of the six biggest countries on the continent viewed humans as food. The Troll Kingdom near the center of the continent even considered 6-month old human fetuses to be an exquisite delicacy, which they served to their most honored guests.

Therefore, the beastman treated the Draconic Kingdom as a food supply to be harvested.

Until recently, the Draconic Kingdom had been regarded as a food source that would replenish itself even when left alone, so the beastmen had not launched a full-scale invasion of the Draconic Kingdom before. But for some unknown reason, such an invasion had occurred. So far, they had conquered three cities.

In those conquered cities, there were horrible banquets that went on day and night, which made the Queen want to vomit when she heard about what was done there.

Faced with this external enemy that could not be bargained with, the humans banded together to resist until the end. However, the difference in ability between the beastmen and humans was just too great to overcome.

If both human and beastman were of the same species, then a beastman would have ten times the strength of a human.

Using the adventurer's rating system, if a human was rated at 3, then a beastman would be rated at 30. The only saving grace for humanity was that exceptional beastmen were surprisingly rare, possibly because the beastmen themselves were already very powerful and generally balanced to begin with.

“Even though we can stall the enemies with the adventurer groups lead by adamantite-ranked adventurers, the enemy are just too numerous. When several tribe-sized groups spread out to attack, we cannot stop them all at once. Therefore, in the end we have to gather all the citizens to the capital, and wait for the enemy to run out of food. However, it is much more likely that our food situation will deteriorate first.”

“What a headache. The future is shrouded in darkness.”

“I propose we take down the enemy general. How about we choose a few elite troops to attack them? Although it seems to be an unnecessary move that may only anger them, since the attacks will not stop anyway, it is still better than doing nothing.”

“If so, the one leading this time will be him?”

“Yes, it is him.”

They were both referring to the same person, a man who was part of “Crystal Tear”, this Kingdom’s only adamantite-ranked adventurer team. His name was Cerabrate, with the title of “Fierce Flash”. He was a member of the “Holy Lord” class, and he was famous for using the Shining Sword technique.

“That person is definitely a lolicon. When I was talking to him, he was staring at me with lecherous eyes. If looking at flat things fills him with so much joy, he should go stare at a wall.”

“It is just a fetish... although he really is a lolicon.”

Draudiron began to frown.

“I wish you hadn't said that… If only our country had more normal adamantite-ranked adventurers.”

“What do you mean? As long as you act like a cute and innocent girl, he would risk his life to fight for us. Wouldn't he be the most suitable situation for us right now?”

“And when the time comes, I will have to satisfy his desires....Oi! Don't look at me like a roasted pig served up for tomorrow's feast!”

“Haaaa…”

Her veins popped out in anger as she sighed.

“It is only this much, your Majesty. It is a lot better than the citizens who are literally being eaten, so please bear with it.”

The queen could not refute him.

“If I had more money, I would have hired the whole “Optics” group. Speaking of which, what is the Slane Theocracy doing?”

“Well, I am not sure.”

“Don’t we donate a huge sum of money to them every year? Normally, they would have rushed here already. Even if it is not the Black Scripture, why haven’t they sent the Sunlight Scripture here?”

The fact that the Slane Theocracy was supporting the Draconic Kingdom was not publicised because she herself was the highest authority of this country.

“Relying on other countries for protection caused this situation in the end. It is quite depressing.”

“Do you think I want to rely on other countries? You should know that military spending was crippling our finances, and if we kept increasing it, our country would be bankrupt by now. Besides, it’s not like we can make an army appear out of nowhere just by spending more money!”

The country had been spending a lot against the beastmen every year for a long time now, and yet the situation had still ended up like this. However, it could also be said that the amount spent was what had kept the situation under control.

“If the Slane Theocracy has abandoned us, what about seeking help from the Empire? If our country is destroyed, wouldn't the Empire be next?”

“There is still the Kattse Plains, so they won't reach the Empire immediately. If they follow a course around the lake, then the Slane Theocracy could be next.”

“...Even the beastmen are not brave enough to rush into an undead spawning ground.”

By the way, there were dragon-riding tribes in the route of their advance, but the queen and her minister did not consider the fact that they could be invaded.

“It is not about bravery, but more because the undead are inedible to them. Besides, there is no benefit in ruling that place. Only another undead creature would be happy to take and hold that cursed land. And the Empire is also quite busy, aren’t they? It’s about time for their annual war.”

“It seems to have started quite late this year.”

“Yeah, it seems to have been delayed by half a year, due to some magic caster's declaration. Do you wish me to investigate?”

“Eh, who cares what happens in other countries! I’m more concerned about what to do to save our country!”

“Well, your Majesty brought up the topic first.....how about using your Majesty’s magic?”

The queen waved her finger to deflect the minister's suggestion. So this was all he knew about magic. Draudiron could only smile bitterly.

“Wild Magic... in this case, it’s usable by a human being because 1/8th of the blood in me belongs to a dragon. In the worst case scenario, it will only delay the destruction of the country. So it will be our last resort.”

“Last resort....I hope that day won't come. Then I will try to seek reinforcements again from the Slane Theocracy.”

“Please do~”

The minister glared coldly at Draudiron, as she replied in her adorable little girl’s voice.

“Just so, Your Majesty. Incidentally, if you have the energy to spare, please write thirty letters of encouragement to the officers at the frontline. In children's handwriting, of course.”

“Ueeeh~ Bring me alcohol! I can't write like that when I’m sober.”

“Understood, you can drink and get drunk all you want. But, finish your work by today.”

The minister bowed, and left the room.

After looking in the direction that he went for a while, she looked back down to her own hands.

“Wild Magic, huh...”

Wild Magic was different from typical magic because it was powered by souls, rather than mana. Therefore, it required the sacrifice of a lot of people, and the released souls would allow the casting of a powerful spell. According to her grandfather, magic like this could create an explosion that could rival the Platinum Dragon Lord’s ultimate attack.

However, for a person far weaker than a Dragon Lord like her, the sacrifice to initiate that sort of spell would be huge, estimated to be in the millions.

Draudiron covered her face with her hands.

She shuddered as she realized that no matter which path she chose, both would lead to hell—

Chapter 3 - Another Battle

3章　もう一つの戦い

Part 1

With the clamoring created by the armies stationed at E-Rantel as they prepared for the upcoming battle echoing behind his back, the first prince Barbro Andrean Ield Ryle Vaiself's current mood was extremely sour as he advanced with his troops towards the north.

"Shit. All because of that Marquis Raeven…"

Barbro could not help but let out a curse.

During the demonic disturbance, his younger brother borrowed men from Marquis Raeven and was able to raise his reputation by patrolling the streets within the capital, leaving behind an image of someone who was capable of taking action during emergencies and was not afraid of going to the frontlines. This was viewed favorably amongst the nobles, causing many of those who supported the first prince Barbro, to change their opinion. Although Marquis Raeven might have played a hand in this as well, a number of nobles had already begun to support the second prince as the next heir.

Not having taken action during the demonic disturbance proved to be a fatal mistake.

The reason why Barbro remained at the palace and did not appear on the frontline was because he had no available pawns to use at that time.

That was the correct decision to make. Going by himself to the frontline would not have made any difference, and he most likely would have ended up becoming a burden instead. Furthermore, there was the possibility that the palace might also get attacked.

If it were not for the subordinates that Marquis Raeven provided, his brother would not have been able to patrol the streets.

Barbro believed his judgement was correct. However, those fools could not even realise that and ended up becoming deceived by what their eyes saw. In the end, everything went according to what Marquis Raeven had initially planned.

“Can those guys not even comprehend the motives behind his actions? Furthermore, all they did was scamper around the city. They didn’t even participate in any of the battles against the demons.”

If his brother had stepped onto the battlefield, he most likely would have revealed his pathetic side to the public. When he thought of it that way, it showed just how terrifyingly capable Marquis Raeven was at using his head.

Also, there was another reason why Barbro’s mood had been foul all day long.

The reason being that he was forced to head over to this backwater village called Carne.

The fight for the throne would have to be put off for later.

In the upcoming battle with the Empire, Barbro had to let the world know of his existence as the first prince of the Kingdom. To make his name known as the next heir of the Kingdom, and to take back what was rightfully his from his brother.

However, instead of being given a crucial position for the upcoming battle, he was given an order that made it seem like he was running away: to head to a village situated near the border and investigate its relationship with Ainz Ooal Gown. Just how much fame could he even gain from doing this?

Suddenly, a chill ran down Barbro’s spine.

Could this be a scheme to ensure that he would not be able to achieve any accomplishments?

Could it be that his father already decided on handing the throne to his brother, and in order to ensure that there was nothing he could do to reverse the situation, Barbro was therefore tasked with investigating this backwater of a village…

Barbro’s breathing became more erratic the more he thought about this. Slowly, his hatred began to burn towards a father who would push aside his firstborn son so that a younger brother who had only displayed a bit of courage could gain the throne. It was enough to cause his vision to narrow.

It was but a coincidence that a rider by Barbro’s side noticed the change in his demeanor.

“Your Highness, are you perhaps feeling unwell? Shall I summon a priest for you?”

The buzzing cry made by the nearby insects caused Barbro to feel nauseous. However, he was able to force down his urge to vomit. Perhaps it was due to the fortunate timing of a sudden cold draft, or it might have been because of the harsh training he received as a member of the royal family, but Barbro was able to keep his facade up.

Exposing one’s feelings was a foolish thing to do.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. I was only thinking about the work that father had entrusted me with. Rather than that, Baron Cheneko, how did your meeting with the adamantite-ranked adventurer Momon go?”

“About that, Your Highness, please listen to this! It was such an unpleasant event! Furthermore, I was unable to see Momon because he was absent.”

“Well, these things were bound to happen. He’s an adamantite-ranked adventurer after all. So what were you angry about? It’s not like you made an appointment or anything, so it can’t be helped if you couldn’t meet.”

“No, it’s not about that. The reason why I’m angry is because of the actions of that Momon’s companion, the one called Nabe!”

“Nabe? Ah, the one nicknamed the ‘Beautiful Princess’?”

Barbro recalled the figure of a woman he saw previously at the Kingdom’s Capital, who possessed a beauty beyond this world. Her appearance could even match up to his younger sister’s. Although Barbro desired her, she was one of the adventurers who had received a reward from his father. He could not use simple methods to get his hands on her.

“So what did that beautiful woman do to you?”

“She assaulted me! Please look at this!”

Baron Cheneko removed his gauntlet, revealing his bruised hand.

“What? Even if she’s an adamantite-ranked adventurer, violence against the nobility is not permitted.”

“Nevertheless, that woman named Nabe suddenly grabbed my hand and drove me out.”

The amount of details given by the Baron was very little, as such, Barbro paid little attention as he listened. No matter how he thought about it, it appeared as if Cheneko was hiding something.

“Your Highness! By all means, please use your royal authority to render justice upon that foolish woman who dared to use violence on me!”

If I were to made use of this incident, would I be able to blackmail that woman and get her to do whatever I want?

Barbro thought about it.

On how to lend a hand to the Baron and make Nabe his. However, he was unable to come up with a good plan. All because this fool of a Baron most likely had orchestrated it as a way to sell him a favor.

Such a useless fool. While I will pretend to treat him kindly for now, the moment I gain the throne I will dispose of him immediately.

The more Barbro thought about this, the more frustrated he became. Even someone like this fool of a Baron was able to have his own territory to govern and men to order around, yet Barbro himself possessed nothing—not a single pawn to use, and he had to rely on others in order to fight his battle. Various thoughts like these surged through his head, yet they were forcefully quelled down in the end.

Turning towards the Baron who was waiting eagerly for his response, Barbro waved his hand as usual and said the following.

"I'll think about it once I've inherited the throne."

"Yes!"

Not wanting to exchange any further dialogue with that fool, Barbro turned his head away and asked towards one of Marquis Bowlrob's subordinates who was riding close by. He was an officer of the elite troops under the direct command of the Marquis.

"Oi, there's something that I want to ask."

"What's wrong, your Highness?"

Truthfully speaking, there was nothing that Barbro wanted to know. However, he could not just suddenly end his conversation with the Baron. He had to quickly come up with a question to ask. The unpleasant thoughts that Barbro had previously buried about suddenly resurfaced.

The ultimate reason as to why Barbro was heading towards Carne Village was because of the proposal made by Marquis Bowlrob. If that was the case, then—

Could it be, the Marquis has betrayed me? In order to allow my *brother to take the throne?*

Such an unbelievable thought.

The Marquis’s daughter was his wife, and his relationship with the Marquis was good. If Barbro was to inherit the throne, Bowlrob would also become the head of the Six Great Families. If the Marquis suddenly started to support his brother, it was most likely just a feint that was part of a greater scheme against Marquis Raeven. However, other than that, Barbro could not think of any other reason why the Marquis had made such a proposal.

In that case… was I sent to such a backwater village in order to make the other nobles think that I won’t be able to earn any achievements?

“Is there something I can do for you? Should we perhaps stop and rest?”

“—Be quiet.”

An uncontrollable hatred leaked from Barbro, causing the knight to show an alarmed expression. Even though Barbro was aware of his unsightly display, he was still unable to hold back his anger.

A burst of murderous intent could be felt from behind Barbro’s teeth as he voiced his command.

“I hereby order you. Once we complete our task at Carne Village, we will immediately head for the battlefield. Make preparations for the journey now while we are still on our way to Carne Village. As soon as we finish our task, we will set out immediately and return to E-Rantel by night fall. After a short break, we will head towards Kattse Plains and aim to get there before sunrise.”

The knight frowned upon hearing that.

“Please forgive my words, but Your Highness’s orders might be difficult to carry out. Please look: Our force consists of the three thousand five hundred men from the Marquis and an additional fifteen hundred men sent from the various nobles as reinforcements for your highness. Altogether we have a total of five thousand troops. To carry out this mission as fast as possible, we didn’t take much troops for logistics, but stowed all our supply on fifty carriages.”

“I’m aware of that already. What’s the problem?”

“Out of the five thousand troops we have, four thousand five hundred of them are infantry and our cavalry only consists of five hundred men. Even if we can finish the task at Carne Village within an hour’s time, it will still be very hard on the troops to have them reach E-Rantel by nighttime.”

“I already said I’m already aware of that. I will ask you once more, do you have a problem with it? If not, follow through with what I ordered.”

“Your Highness… Some of the troops might not be able to keep up.”

“You seemed to have misunderstood something. Honestly speaking, for such a small village that lies on our border, there’s almost zero value for us to go there. What we really should be doing is heading to Kattse Plains to defeat the Empire. What do you think? You are the Marquis’ subordinate, are you not? In that case I ask you, do you think that the coming battle will be so easy as to afford to send five thousand troops elsewhere to play around? Do you really believe that is the case?”

The knight closed his mouth tight.

“Do not confuse your priorities. …You say stragglers will appear within our troops? In that case, just let them go. The reason why you guys were gathered in the first place was for the battle at Kattse Plains.”

…*And to raise my reputation.*

“…It is as you say. I understand.”

The knight bowed his head.

“You should have answered like that from the start. Plan for when we would reach E-Rantel and when we would head out. I will leave the details to you.”

“Yes! I will do so immediately and will definitely bring you results.”

By the time the knight had left, his existence had already faded from Barbro’s mind.

Does my father hate me? Or has old age caused his mind to become hazy? To give away the throne to the younger brother when it is clearly the eldest son’s right to inherit… This will only antagonize the nobles.

Even though Barbro’s current situation was overwhelmingly to his disadvantage, he firmly believed he could turn the tide. *Let them regret giving me the chance to take command of five* *thousand troops*.

Those ideas swirled inside the mind of Barbro.

“Baron!”

“Yes!”

“I will be expecting you to perform your best!”

His sharp voice seemed to as if wanting to convey something more, echoing left, right and over.

Just you wait, Zanack. Bite your nails while you wait for me at the Capital.

Even though they were connected by blood, his brother was still an opponent who must be defeated in order to gain the throne. Furthermore, Barbro never particularly liked him in the first place. Although it was not enough to warrant his immediate death, but if Zanack was to cause any additional trouble, Barbro will be sure to dispose of him.

Once I become king, how should I make use of him? Would it be better to just have him killed so that those foolish nobles won’t be able to use him as a symbol for revolt? But wouldn’t that be too wasteful? If *he was a woman there would be many uses… Like my sister, even though her head isn’t very good, but at least her looks are rather decent. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to just sell her to the highest bidder. …Although that might cause some problems due to her royal blood, maybe it’s best to marry her off to some distant kingdom. …Perhaps that might even become part of my future foundation for power. Well, let’s just wait and see.*

Barbro’s eyes narrowed as he began to envision the ideal Re-Estize Kingdom he would build in the future.

The image of the nobles kneeling before him as he sat on top of the golden throne.

With a single command, the entire court would bow down.

“Oh how great that would be.”

A faint smile appeared over Barbro’s face, but was covered almost immediately by his hand.

The task at Carne Village would be completed immediately, and after that, they would immediately rush over to Kattse Plains. Whether it would remain a dream or become reality depended on how well the two tasks were completed.

…*I must get the soldiers moving even if I have to use force. What’s important is that I must arrive before the battle starts. Wait, no. Would it be better to wait until the battle starts and try to ambush the enemy?*

Although that might indeed be a good move to take, however Barbro had little confidence in his ability to lead his troops to suddenly attack the enemy’s rear and flanks.

As much as Barbro was inclined to believe otherwise, he couldn’t help but to let the knights handle it instead. Although leaving his fate on whether or not he could become king to others might indeed prove to be a rather unwise idea.

While deep in thought on how to best display his brilliance, an idea flashed across his mind.

Could the villagers from Carne Village be used as negotiation tools against Ainz Ooal Gown?

It was as if a brilliant light suddenly shone upon Barbro, covering his body with radiance.

The ultimate scheme!

No matter what kind of reason Ainz Ooal Gown had for rescuing those at Carne Village, their existence could be used as bargaining chips.

If this unknown magic caster called Ainz Ooal Gown would withdraw from the coming battle, the Empire will lose their reason for starting the conflict and will most likely retreat as well.

If the Empire were to withdraw due to the actions undertaken by Barbro—

Would this be the best thing to happen? Father will no longer be able to ignore my opinions, and my chances of becoming the next king will become certain.

“Very good. That would be the best.”

However, if it was just a passing whim as to why Ainz Ooal Gown had decided to help Carne Village, then the possibility of him taking the bait would be low. Were that the case, then when the time comes, Barbro would just have to forcefully conscript the villagers for the coming battle. The conflict the Kingdom was facing this time required the mobilization of an entire nation. Mere peasants from Carne Village had no rights to refuse.

Although his father might have given the people permission to refuse conscription, the current situation had changed. At this moment, the commanding officer—which happened to be Barbro himself, had the right to decide what could or could not be done.

If the peasants from Carne Village were able to slay Ainz Ooal Gown, this would demonstrate that he was only at the level of a human and could be publicized as propaganda for all to see. It could even be used against the Empire.

Barbro couldn't help but tremble at the perfect strategy that he came up with all by himself.

Honestly speaking, although he always assumed that his head was never as good as his brother's when it comes to scheming, but it now looked like that might not be the case after all. Barbro began to marvel at the discovery of his own hidden talents finally starting to bloom.

Part 2

The coming of winter was hell for small villages. All they could do was pray for the coming of the warmer seasons while weathering the cold days in their homes. If spring was late, or if the harvest in autumn was meager, they might be forced to eat their seed stock, and people would still starve to death even if they did so.

Although the fields did not need to be tilled in winter, village life was still closely associated with the words “activity”. There were many tasks to be done indoors, like tending the livestock and maintaining the farming tools. Besides, their homes, huts and stables all needed to be cleaned. There was simply no time to rest.

This was especially true in Carne Village, where they had to support the carnivorous monsters like ogres. They couldn’t rely on snare traps alone to hunt up enough meat to solve that problem, so the villagers had ended up raising pigs instead, buying them with the sizable amount of money they received from selling the herbs they had harvested.

The goblins led those pigs into the Great Forest of Tob to graze on roots and stems. There was only a small number of pigs right now because this plan was still at an experimental stage, but if it went well and if they could make it through the winter, they would steadily increase the number of pigs to raise in the future.

Normally, they would need to pay taxes to the landlord of the land they were grazing on, but fortunately, Carne Village did not need to do that. The reason was because the Great Forest of Tob was the dwelling place of monsters, and was not ruled by humans.

Carne Village’s future seemed very bright indeed.

All of this was thanks to Ainz Ooal Gown, who had saved the village and given it much support. In addition, the Dark Hero Momon had subdued the Wise King of the Forest. Many people in the village gave thanks to the two of them, and some even prayed to them over breakfast, revering them in the same breath as they did the gods.

It was precisely this overflowing of hope that gave the new chief, Enri Emmot, so much work.

Today, Enri, followed by Nfirea, were heading to a small hut for their work.

In a frontier village like Carne, everyone in the village worked together like they were family. If they did not do this, there would be no way for them to survive. They shared their farming implements and even took turns to use their community cows to till the fields.

Because of this, the care and feeding of the livestock was a group activity. And the hay for the cows in winter was stored in small huts just like this one.

Enri opened the wooden door and entered, followed closely by Nfirea. Holding herself upright as though she were still opening the door, Enri sat herself down onto a pile of hay, sinking her rear into the dried grass with a soft *plop*.

After closing the door, Nfirea sat by her side, his magic mote of light illuminating the surroundings.

“Chief, you should save the playing around for after you finish this; we still need to see if we have enough hay and then make several decisions afterwards.”

“You’re calling me Chief again…”

Nfirea couldn’t help giggling at Enri’s bored reply.

“Well, who cares, anyway? I *am* the Chief, after all. That’s right, Agu thinks I can squish all the goblins into paste if I felt like it! Compared to that, all these problems are nothing!”

Ever since she had won her arm-wrestling match with Agu, the village people were muttering “it might be true”. The atmosphere that sort of thing produced was very troubling. Incidentally, she had not challenged the ogres. If she lost, it wouldn’t prove anything, and if she won, or at least lost narrowly, it would get even worse.

—Does this mean if I let Enfi get away, I’ll never be able to get married?

Sweat slowly beaded on Enri’s hands.

“Ah— right. Aren’t you going to open the window? It’s dry now, so opening it should be fine.”

“Eh? No, no need, we don’t need to, right? And look, we’ve got a magic light here.”

“Really? Well, if Enfi doesn’t mind, then neither do I.”

Magic illumination was brighter than the sun. She knew this, but Enri’s suggestion was based purely on the logic that “since the sun’s out, isn’t it wasteful to use mana for a magical light”? In addition, she wanted to change the current mood in the room. There hadn’t been any reason for that and she didn’t particularly mind when he refused. However, sitting next to her, Nfirea seemed to be having some kind of strange reaction, with his ears being bright red and all.

Is it really depleting so much of his mana? But I heard light-creating magic wasn’t that tiring… did he use some other spell before coming here? Come to think of it, he doesn’t smell of herbs. In fact, he smells kind of… nice.

“W-what’s wrong, Enri?”

Nfirea’s words came out in a panicked squeak as Enri pressed her nose close to him.

“Mm? Ah, no, nothing, I just thought I smelled something nice…”

“Y-you did? Well, that’s good to hear. That must be the cologne I made.”

“Really… why don’t you try selling it in town next time? I’m sure it’ll fetch a good price.”

“No, that… this… isn’t meant for…”

“Hm-mm… well, forget it. Anyway, there should be enough hay in this hut. Shall we move on?”

“Mm, yeah. Then, before we move on, let me check on something first. It’s cold outside, after all.”

“…Well, this place isn’t that warm either… ah, forget it.”

“That… about that. I wanted to discuss something with you.”

Nfirea, who was sitting beside her, seemed a little tense.

What was going on with him?

As Enri bathed the side of his face in a suspicious stare, Nfirea took out a handful of papers.

They were covered in tiny letters. Although Enri could recognize several words, there were more words there which she did not know than she did in her brief glimpse.

“The first thing is how to feed the remaining goblins from Agu’s tribe and the ogres.”

“Eh? Aren’t we fine as we are? They helped with the harvest in the autumn, and we managed to buy the ogres’ food from the city.”

“Mmm, and the herbs sold for a good price, so we can say we’ve got ample food reserves. It should be enough to deal with his winter. Even if we add a few extras, our food stocks should still hold out. But if the numbers keep increasing, life’s going to be quite harsh. Maybe we should acquire our food by other means.”

There were 14 people in Agu’s tribe now. They were not born, but instead, they managed to escape from the territory of the Giant of the West and the Serpent of the East.

“Mmmm. Although I don’t see a problem, we should probably buy more food from E-Rantel. However, I was planning to save some money to commission some metal tools for the ogres.”

“If we could make some farming tools for the ogres, the spring seeding should go a lot faster. …But the problem is that if we order tools for the ogres, they’ll be big enough that no human could use them, and that’ll raise a lot of questions.”

“And if word about the ogres gets out, it’ll cause a lot of problems, right?”

When the tax collectors came in autumn, Jugem and the others had to hide in order to escape being noticed. Incidentally, it was due to their efforts that the grain harvest was so bountiful.

Since Carne Village had been attacked by Imperial knights, they only needed to pay a nominal tribute, which was a stroke of luck for them. In addition, they were excused from the draft for several years.

Most of that was a form of apology for not protecting Carne Village properly, but it looked like they felt genuine guilt about that as well. There were some questions about the mighty wall surrounding the village, but they deflected questions by saying “it was the work of that magic caster”. If they could do that, surely they could explain the ogres away as well, right? At least, that was what Enri thought, but Nfirea shook his head.

“There’s no doubt about that. If it goes bad, the Kingdom might even send a punitive force out.”

“That’s too much!”

“You say that, but the truth is that ogres usually eat people. The only reason why they can live with us in this village is because of Jugem-san, who’s stronger than us. Don’t forget that.”

“I haven’t…”

“Another thing is that we have far too few people in this village. We need to think about how to get more residents. If the newcomers arrived with the spring planting season, that would be great.”

“That’s a big if. And, like you said, what happens if they see the goblin-sans and ogre-sans and run off? What then?”

That doubtful question came from Enri. As she spoke, something strange seemed to be happening with Nfirea. Something like… his mind wasn’t fully there or something like that.

“Eh? Ah, no, nothing’s wrong!”

There was no way that could be true. Was he feeling restless? After all, her lover had a bad habit of dropping everything to obsess about his potions.

As he saw Enri’s eyebrows furrowing, Nfirea took a deep breath and shifted his body over.

Hm? So he’s really restless, after all? He does do a lot of experiments everyday… but it’ll be cold if he sleeps here. Although it’s kind of warm in the hay…

While Enri was thinking about this. Nfirea slowly leaned more and more of his weight on her.

What’s wrong? Though come to think about it, it would be better if Nfirea were a bit stronger… I guess he needs more meat. He hasn’t been eating and sleeping enough.

A playful impulse came over Enri, and she pushed Nfirea back. She’d originally intended to use just a bit of force, but because she used too much strength, she ended up pinning him below herself instead.

“—Ueeeeh?”

Before Enri’s eyes, Nfirea’s surprised and confused face slowly turned bright red.

Aaaah~ It must be embarrassing for a man to lose to a woman in *strength. That’s why I said you need to eat more…*

Just as Enri rolled herself off him, Nfirea lay down in the hay and closed his eyes.

They stayed like this for several seconds, enjoying the peace and quiet.

“…What’s wrong, Enfi? Do you want to sleep?”

Nfirea sat back up, his face uncharacteristically red.

“Uh… oh… um. N-nothing…”

“—Ane-san!”

The door flew open without a knock as the shout reached her ears. So forceful was the entry that the door crashed loudly against the nearby wall.

“Hueeee?”

The curious squeak came from Nfirea.

“W-w-w-w-what happened?”

“Sorry for disturbing you two, but this is an emergency!”

“What happened?”

This was the first time she’d seen Jugem this worried ever since that troll attacked. A strange, terrible premonition seemed to run through her body.

“Troops! A large body of troops is heading this way!”

“Eh?! What, what did you say? Whose troops are they?”

“We don’t know about heraldry so we couldn’t tell. But there’s a lot of different coats of arms, so you should come and look… In any case, we should shut the gate first. What should we do?”

“That! Ah… well, can you tell us which coats of arms make up the most among them? If you can describe or sketch them for me I can help.”

After listening to Jugem’s explanation, a suspicious expression spread over Nfirea’s face.

“How strange. Those are flags from the Kingdom. If we knew which nobles’ crests they were, we could identify who was coming here.”

Carne Village was a frontier village, and before it had been founded there had only been forest here. It was obvious that their objective was Carne Village, but why they were coming here was still a mystery.

“But why? Do you know why, Nfirea?”

“Why would the Kingdom’s troops would come to the village? If they wanted to go to the Great Forest of Tob, it’s strange that they’re sending so many troops. They could have just sent adventurers instead. If that’s the case… maybe there’s a revolt or something…”

“Could that sort of thing really happen?”

“It’s just a rumour, but I’ve heard that the King’s power isn’t actually very strong. Currently, it seems like the nobles are in conflict with the King. If that’s the case, are they coming to Carne Village to attack it?”

The blood drained from Enri’s face.

Could it be that the village would be subject to a dreadful assault like last time?

—However, the circumstances now were different from then.

Enri decided to face it head on.

“We should flee into the forest before the troops reach here!”

“…Ane-san, I’m sorry. We spotted them too late, so if we ran now, we’d have to leave all our things here. In addition, since it’s winter, the chances of monsters appearing in the forest are also very high. If we run from one problem, we end up running right into another instead.”

Jugem’s pained expression made Enri feel dizzy.

They would not be able to survive if the troops burned the village down in winter.

“If that’s the case… ah! That’s right! If we can’t flee with our possessions, then we should prepare for battle and hide food and the other necessities at the same time!”

“Yes! That’s a good plan, Enri! The cellars where Jugem and the ogres hid from the tax collectors shouldn’t have been buried yet. We’ll move everything in there!”

Just as Enri was about to move into action, she remembered a question she hadn’t asked yet.

What were their numbers? The villagers could estimate how much food to hide if they knew how many there were.

“How many are there? It should be about a hundred, right?”

“No…”

As Enri saw Jugem taking a deep breath and slowly answering, she had the sudden urge to stuff her fingers in her ears.

“Not just a hundred… more like thousands.”

Enri blinked. So did Nfirea beside her.

“They have about four thousand people at the very least, I think.”

“But that’s… why would they send so many…”

“I have no idea. Why would they send so many troops to a village like this? …Enri, could it be that word got out about the goblins in the village?”

“No way. It’s impossible.”

Enri’s reply came immediately.

No matter how she thought, she couldn’t think of a reason for a leak. There had been immigrants, but they all felt that the goblins were more trustworthy than humans. Ever since the troll attack the barriers between the original and new residents of the village had all but disappeared.

It might have been because of adventurers —perhaps Momon and Nabe had spread the word to avenge their fallen comrades— but Nfirea was insistent that that could not be the case.

“Then… while we prepare to flee, we should ask them why they came. Fighting… is a last resort.”

Doing battle with an army of four thousand men was nothing short of suicide.

“Like Ani-san said, that’s all we can do… I guess against these numbers, there’s no other way.”

“Umu. That’s why, we should get ready to flee at any moment, while trying to buy time for our escape. Then, let’s go!”

Several villagers were helping to hide the food along with the ogres. The only ones left were Enri, Jugem, and some of the goblins, along with Britta and several members of the defence force.

The first thing Enri did was to question Britta about the situation, asking about the identity of the interlopers and whose crests they bore. But sadly, Britta couldn’t give her any answers.

According to her, someone else had always handled that sort of thing. In that moment, Enri realised how important it was to be well-informed. Because of that, all they could do was to wait for Nfirea to make his report after coming back from the watch tower.

The sound of hooves came from the other side of the wall, and then a loud voice.

“This one is the envoy of the Crown Prince of the Re-Estize Kingdom, Barbro Andreyan Ield dale Vaiself! Open the gate and let us in!”

Enri doubted her ears again.

Although she had heard many surprising things in a short period of time, this one took the cake.

“T-the Crown Prince?!”

What on earth was someone like that doing here?!

Enri had no idea what was going on. All this was starting to feel like a bad dream.

However, judging by the way Nfirea was scurrying back from the watchtower, the envoy’s words were most likely true.

“The King’s flag is among them. Only the royal family or those related to them would be allowed to bear that flag.”

“Eh? What does that mean?”

“It means that the royal family has brought troops to our village!”

Enri raised her voice, unable to understand what was going on.

“Why, why do you need to send so many troops to a frontier village like this?”

“Peasants like you don’t need to know about that! This land belongs to the King, and obeying the King is all you need to do! Or could it be that you’re defying the King — raising your flag in revolt?”

Enri’s body shuddered.

As subjects of the King, they should open their doors. However—

—Jugem exchanged a glance with Enri from the side.

Even if they went to open the gate right away, they couldn’t do it instantly. Before that, they had to hide the goblins and the ogres.

“Ah, Ane-san. We’ll hide ourselves as quickly as we can. Until then, please buy us some time.”

Enri nodded. *Why did I order them to hide the food first*, she thought, but it was too late for regrets now.

“I repeat… Open the gate!”

“My, my apologies! Right now, right now we’re preparing to welcome his Majesty the Prince! Please, hold on a bit!”

“Repeat yourself, woman! Are you in charge of this village? This delay is unacceptable! Do not waste even a single second in opening the gate!”

“…Why are you so desperate to get in?!”

Under pressure, the already uneasy Enri responded with an angry shout. While she knew it was disrespectful, she couldn’t rule out the possibility that they were soldiers from another country masquerading as Kingdom troops.

Carne Village’s defenses were extremely solid. They had shocked the tax collectors who had seen them.

It wouldn’t be a surprise if another country wanted to use it as a base. After all, the trolls had attacked for precisely that reason.

The other side fell silent for once, and both sides hesitated uneasily.

“Why aren’t you answering! You’re impostors pretending to be Kingdom troops, aren’t you!”

After that panicked shout, she finally got an answer.

“…the magic caster called Ainz Ooal Gown came to this village once, did he not?”

The image of the village’s savior appeared in Enri’s head.

“That magic caster is now an enemy of the Kingdom. As such, we wish to ask you, who are related to Ainz Ooal Gown, about him.”

Overcome by surprise, Enri was unable to speak.

However, the whispers of one of the defense force members worked its way into her ear.

“If Ainz-sama is opposed to the Kingdom… then isn’t it the Kingdom that’s wrong?”

The eyes of the villagers reflected their agreement.

Of particular note were those villagers who moved to Carne Village after their original homes had been burned down. Their hatred of the Kingdom for not being able to defend them swiftly turned into trust and reverence of the magic caster who saved this village.

Be it the gift of the horn that had summoned the goblins, or the provision of the golems that built the sturdy walls that now protected them, or the maid Lupusregina who saved the village when they were attacked by the troll, all these came together and became reverence for Ainz.

“…But, there’s a lot of them. If we don’t open the gate…”

“But if we betray Ainz-sama like this after receiving his kindness…”

“Wait! They said they just want to ask us something. It doesn’t mean we’re betraying him…”

“Is that so? In the end, it still sounds ungrateful to me.”

Everyone’s eyes were on Enri.

She understood well the hearts of both sides. Because of that, Enri hesitated, unable to choose between the sides. Just at this moment, an angry shout came from outside the gate.

“If you understand, open the gates right now! If not, you will be treated as traitors to the Kingdom!”

Pushed to the limit, Enri shouted back something to try and buy time.

“Dung, there is cow dung everywhere! W-we can’t let the Prince walk into a place like this!”

After a brief silence, a calmer voice pierced the air.

“Oh, um. Understood. Then how about this. We will enter instead of his Majesty the Prince. We’ll think about what happens later.”

There were no more excuses she could give.

Enri’s mind had gone completely blank. Not caring what it was, she shouted the first thing she could think of in response.

“S-sorry! The dung’s on my hands! I can’t rub it off! Let me wash my hands and I’ll be back!”

“—O-oi!”

Enri watched the retreating backs of Jugem and the others.

She was worried about how much time that had bought them.

◆ ◆ ◆

Barbro’s increasing impatience was starting to spread to the rest of the unit. He glared at the reporting knight with a look usually reserved for an enemy.

“Say it one more time, what foolery is this?!”

Barbro’s anger overflowed with every word he spoke from between the gaps of his grinding teeth, and the knight repeated himself.

“Sir! Carne Village still has not opened their gates.”

As he listened to the knight’s calm reply, Barbro was filled with the sudden desire to punch him.

However, that would have been foolish. Barbro struggled to control the anger welling up in his fist.

This knight included, nobody here was actually sworn to Barbro. In the first place, Barbro commanded no troops. Every man here was under orders from their liege lord, or in the company of their lord. Because of that, he could not strike his allies while the other knights were watching.

“—Why? Why are those peasants in Carne Village not opening the gate? The land is directly ruled by the royal family! They’re supposed to obey me! I told them to open the gate, didn’t I?!”

As his impatience built and his blood pumped faster, his words started to lose coherence.

“What’s the problem? Are they looking down on me? What are you waiting for?!”

The villagers were beings far inferior to the Crown Prince. These beings were now insulting him.

As that thought came to mind, it blended with the aggravation that gripped his heart. This festering, sticky hatred that had been building up inside him for the months since the demonic disturbance, and the upwelling of resentment burst like a dam.

The words came out in an instant.

“Traitors! Traitors, all of them! I declare that everyone in Carne Village is a traitor!”

The shout carried through the air, into the ears of the surrounding soldiers, triggering a surprised commotion from the men.

“My lord, please wait! If you do that…!”

Barbro stared unhappily at the panicked knight who replied.

If they designated the village as traitors, they would need to exterminate each and every last one of them for starters, then burn the village down until no trace of its existence remained.

But so what?

Prince Barbro couldn’t understand why his subordinates were not following the order he gave. After all, these men belonged to the Marquis and they were looking down on him and refusing to obey his words.

“What nonsense is this?! Allowing them to live after disobeying a royal command is a sin!”

That was true. Permitting treason against the royal family was an insult to them. Sparing them would eventually result in a loss of authority and the mandate to rule.

Even on the nobles’ own territory, once any of their serfs rose up in revolt, they would undoubtedly be destroyed without mercy. The knights of the Marquis should have known that much.

“Please wait, my Prince! The war with the Empire is coming soon. If we kill citizens of the King’s demesne, it will negatively affect the morale of the entire army! I also pray you will look at the fortifications. There is no way this is an ordinary village. Although the villagers are not numerous, trying to break down the gate with brute force will be difficult in the extreme. If that is the case, we should ask them their reasons for not opening the gate after things settle down here.”

“…Ask them nicely, and then hang a few of them.”

“…It can’t be helped. After all, they did keep the gate shut in defiance of Barbro-sama’s orders.”

“You must get that gate open, and then we’ll make an example of them!”

“Understood!”

Prince Barbro gazed at Carne Village.

As the knight said, the sturdy gate was set into thick curtain walls. Given that the village was right next to the Great Forest of Tob, this might even have been intentional. However, from the way the watchtowers were placed, it resembled a fortress more than a frontier village.

Bringing it down would take a long time.

Over a thousand soldiers were lined up in front of the gate, shouting at them to open up.

If one listened carefully, one could hear the same sounds in the distance, from the rear gate.

These shouts were like sparks from a flint, falling upon the tinder that represented the complex mix of emotions in Prince Barbro’s heart. The fire rose, and as it burned, he lost his ability to think.

“Oi! Fire the flame arrows!”

“F-flame arrows?!”

“That’s right. God only knows how long this is going to take with all this waiting. Listen up, we don’t have time to waste on this village any further! If you could open that gate in a few minutes that would be fine, but you can’t, can you?!”

The knight could only nod while gritting his teeth.

“Threaten them with flame arrows. The time for playing childish games like standing outside the wall and shouting is over. Now we show them how adults do things!!”

As the knight stared, open-mouthed and dumbfounded, a man stormed up from his side.

“To think you would disobey his Majesty the Prince… I can’t believe you’re one of the Marquis’ men. My Prince, will you permit my men to carry out that attack?”

This was Baron Cheneko. Behind him were several of his fellow brown-nosers.

Prince Barbro was glad that such men existed, who could be useful despite their foolishness. No, he was a noble as well, and if a village in his fief had dared rise up in revolt, he would probably have done the same thing as well. He might even understand Prince Barbro’s position.

"…Is that so. Then I order you to make it so, Baron. Fire flame arrows at the village… no, this way is better. Target the watchtower. That ought to avoid casualties, right?"

"Ooohh! Such a merciful decision! As expected of my Prince! Then, you have but to watch us!"

♦ ♦ ♦

"Ane-san! We're ready! Everyone's taken cover. We're the only ones le— what's that?"

Jugem could sense an oddity in the surrounding air, and warily asked about it

The defense force members who had remained here were completely opposed to each other. Half of them were reluctantly in favor of opening the gates for the army outside while the other half were fiercely opposed to it. The root of the dispute was whether or not they would be betraying the village's hero, Ainz Ooal Gown. As a result, it was hard to make a decision.

"Actually…"

Enri was about to say something to Jugem when a loud voice came from outside the walls.

“—Citizens of Carne Village. Because you did not immediately open the gate when ordered, the fact of whether you are loyal subjects of the Kingdom has been called into question. As such, we will take representatives from among you onto the battlefield, where you will convince Ainz Ooal Gown to surrender. Doing so will allow you to prove that your loyalty remains with the Kingdom, and that you are loyal subjects!”

The atmosphere started to change. Hatred burned in the villagers’ hearts like a wildfire.

Enri was no exception.

It was true that the villagers were citizens of the Kingdom, and loyal. However, that loyalty paled in comparison to the gratitude they felt to the man who had saved their village for no charge or obligation. After all, when their families, friends and lovers had been murdered, the only one who had reached out a hand to help them was that great magic caster.

“I’ll never let myself be dragged onto the battlefield to get in Ainz-sama’s way!”

“Can’t we just hide in the forest and see how things go before making a decision?”

Loud arguments like these echoed from all around.

However, the one thing they had in common was that nobody wanted to do anything which might inconvenience their hero.

It was at this moment that the sound of something stretching carried over from the outside, followed by the sound of several objects piercing the air. As the sound came closer, points of brilliant red light appeared before their eyes, and arrows fell like rain onto the watchtower. The sound of the arrows piercing into the wood and lighting up in flame filled everyone’s ears.

“…No way…”

The Kingdom was going to use lethal weapons against them. That fact made Enri gasp.

Fortunately, nobody was in the watchtower at the time. They had known that before they attacked. Or maybe—

—Maybe they wouldn’t have hesitated if there were someone inside anyway.

“An-Ane-san! Although it looks like they’re not attacking us yet, you still shouldn’t be standing in their bow range! Over here, quickly!”

Enri, still watching the burning watchtower in a stupor, was dragged away by Jugem. She didn’t resist as Jugem grabbed her by the hand and ran, but her face was still turned to the watchtower.

Just as the defense force began scattering to the rear, the watchtower blazed up in an inferno.

The thatched roof caught alight in an instant and turned into a massive pyre.

Everyone in the village could see the destruction of the tower, no matter where they were. Wails of sorrow rose from all around her. One in particular was especially loud. As Enri tried to catch her breath and get herself under control, she saw the man who had screamed the loudest, whose voice carried the most anguish.

He was a man who had moved into the village.

His face was a mix of hatred and despair. She looked around herself, and many of the immigrants had similar expressions on their faces.

Enri remembered.

Their villages had been burned down in a similar way.

“The enemy!” the man screamed. “They’re the enemy! How can they not be the enemy when they do this! I want to fight them!”

“Whose Kingdom is this?! They didn’t even help us! And now they want to burn this place down?!”

That shout came from a plump woman.

“How can they be allowed to do this! If they want to kill me, go right ahead! I’ll take as many of the bastards down with me as I can! I’ll get revenge for them!”

A young man followed up with a cry of his own.

Madness and hatred were saturating the air, thanks in no small part to the flame arrows.

“…Ane-san. It’s time to make a decision.”

Jugem’s quiet voice came from a face as hard as any warrior’s armor.

“Eh? …But these people have lost the ability to think. Shouldn’t we wait before making a decision?”

“There’s no time. And nobody can guarantee they won’t go berserk. It’s best if you decide what the village is going to do right now.”

That was a reasonable suggestion. The army had already destroyed the watchtower with flame arrows. The next time round, they would probably do something worse. They had to act now.

As Enri screwed up her determination, she took a deep breath. She glanced briefly to Nfirea, who was holding Nemu’s hand, and they nodded to her, as though in encouragement.

Her chest no longer felt as tight.

That was the final dose of courage Enri needed.

“Everyone! Right now! Everyone here is going to decide what we, as a village are going to do! Whatever the decision, I hope you will abide by it!”

A great chorus of approval was her answer.

“Hands up everyone who wishes the village to do as the Kingdom says!”

Not a single hand was raised.

As her heart pounded mightily in her chest, Enri shouted once more.

“Then! Everyone who wants to fight the Kingdom to their last breath, hands up!”

With a thunderous roar, numberless hands rose in unison. Everyone who did so had their fists tightly clenched, the grim set on their faces showing their determination to resist.

It was frightening. Everyone here had chosen a path that could only end in their deaths. Even so, there was something which outweighed the fear of death which motivated everyone here.

It was the desire to not repay the kindness and succour they had received with treachery.

“Then — we fight! We fight to repay the debt we owe! Jugem-san! I’ll leave the battle plan to you!”

Jugem strode forth and stood by Enri’s side.

“…I’ve seen your resolve. You’re all going to die here. Are you all alright with that?”

The veteran’s words were met with unanimous approval.

“You’re able to shout so loudly despite your pale faces. Magnificent. …However, I’m sorry to rain on your parade, after you all loudly proclaimed your decision. Shouldn’t you let the young ones run away first? After all, if anyone’s going to die, it should be us and the old uncles.”

An older man spoke up.

“He’s got a point — but isn’t that impossible? The enemy’s sealed off both gates. Even if we climbed over the walls, they’d spot us right away.”

“Well, that’s true… if we were just running away normally, like you said.”

Jugem grinned evilly as he continued.

“We can’t hide and then run. So what we’ll do is we’ll open the main gate and lure the enemy inside. While they’re caught off guard, we’ll hit them hard. If we can do enough damage, the enemy will gather their dispersed troops and focus on us.”

Jugem looked around.

“I say that, but the enemy may know it’s a ruse. If that’s the case, as long as we have enough attack power, the enemy will have no choice but to gather their troops up. Any questions?”

“Doesn’t look like it, but Jugem-san, where should they flee?”

“Isn’t that obvious, Ane-san? Into the Great Forest of Tob. I’ll assign Agu and Britta, who both know the forest, to the escape party. I’m sure we can manage for a while without them around.”

The villagers had already prepared themselves for death, but it was only natural that they wouldn’t want their children to perish with them. Knowing that their children were in danger dampened their fighting spirit.

Jugem addressed them with a serious expression on his face.

“Listen up. The first round is a battle to make the enemy consolidate their troops. The second round will be a battle to deplete their fighting strength, so they don’t have any left over. The fiercer that battle is, the better the chances for the escapees.”

“Hahahaha! Is that all! Ahhhh, well, that’s a relief.”

Those words were joined by several laughs. That laughter wasn’t born of desperation or madness — it was just a simple, relaxed laugh.

“As long as my wife and children can be saved, I have no regrets. Now’s the time to repay the kindness Ainz Ooal Gown-sama showed us!”

“Ah, that’s right! If I grow old as a coward, I wouldn’t be able to look myself in the face!”

“Then … what about the escape team?”

Jugem looked carefully at everyone as he answered Nfirea’s question.

“Ane-san and Ani-san will be responsible for protecting the women and children. And like I said earlier, we’ll need Britta, Agu, and the other goblins to help guide them through the woods.”

“—Eh?”

Enri exclaimed in surprise.

As the village chief, she had an obligation to stand with the others. Since she had ordered the villagers to die, then she could do nothing less than stand by their sides as they fought. Even so, the villagers exclaimed before Enri.

Their eyes said they unanimously agreed with Jugem. Just as Enri was thinking of how to refuse, the matter had already been taken out of her hands.

“Enri-chan, I’ll leave it to you.”

“Please take care of my children. Although my wife’s already dead… at least, these kids…”

The villagers took turns to hold her hands, imparting their hopes and thoughts to her as they squeezed them tightly. Nfirea sidled up to Enri, whose eyes were filling with tears.

“Enri, let’s go. Our struggle is to live on. We can’t lose that battle. And who knows, Ainz Ooal Gown-sama might come to save us again. At that time, it’ll be better if we’re around, as the ones who set foot inside his domain.”

“He’s right, you know.”

“Jugem-san…”

“That horn you used to summon us… I think you should use it afterwards, don’t you think? If you used it now, it would be like trying to put out a burning house with a glass of water. It would be better if you blew it after all this was over and summoned more of our comrades to help you.

Enri clutched her eyes, which were full of tears.

“I got it! I’ll protect everyone’s wives and children! Let’s go! Enfi!”

♦ ♦ ♦

One side of the gate opened slowly.

“We should have used the flame arrows from the beginning. Well, the follow-up flame arrows were wasted…”

Prince Barbro’s face twisted into a frown. They had wasted too much time. In order to make up for the delay, the men would need to be force-marched. But that was unavoidable. This was all the fault of the Marquis’ men. If he hadn’t given the order to use flame arrows himself, who knew how much more time would have been wasted?

Barbro looked to the sky, cursing his misfortune for being saddled with incompetent underlings.

He considered the time that would be needed later — the first thing being how long it would take to hang the villagers.

He would hang them on the village’s walls, to show everyone the final fate of anyone foolish enough to defy the royal family.

Next, he had to find anyone who had close ties with Ainz Ooal Gown. That might take longer than stringing the villagers up.

“Damn. I should have brought an interrogator along. First, we pretend to spare the lives of anyone who cooperates… then we kill them later. As for the kids…”

There was no point in letting them live. To begin with, children could not live without their parents, so hanging children with their parents was a form of mercy.

“Is there enough rope for all of them? If we could get some from the village, that would be good…”

The soldiers near the gate were slowly advancing. Pride filled Prince Barbro’s chest as he saw the royal flag advancing at the head of the column. When he ascended to the throne, he would make sure he had ceremonial guards like that.

The soldiers holding the flags packed themselves into the gate — and were then flung back out.

Shortly after, the gigantic creatures that had sent them flying loomed in the opening of the gate.

“—O-o-ogres?! What are ogres doing here?!”

The completely unexpected development took Prince Barbro by surprise, and he he had forgotten the dignity of the royal family in his shock.

Yes. Those were the demi-humans known as ogres. The soldiers were just as shocked by their sudden appearance as Barbro was. Their mighty clubs sent dozens of people flying with every swing.

Amidst a spray of blood and gore, the stricken soldiers flew into the distance and impacted on the ground, rolling head over tail before smashing into their fellow troops. Those soldiers immediately turned tail and desperately began to flee from the gate. Then, as if to pursue the defeated troops, several more ogres appeared from behind the gate.

As the soldiers fell back in a disgraceful rout, they were sent flying by blows from the ogres' clubs. It looked like children throwing their toys into the distance.

The reason for this unsightly retreat —which couldn't even be considered a withdrawal— was because these soldiers were all the Baron's levied troops. They had loosed the flame arrows in order to win the right to be the first through the gate. Who could have thought their quest for glory could have backfired so badly?

Prince Barbro frowned at the Baron, who had abandoned the very men he led and come scampering back in front of him. At this moment, the sound of a clarion rang through the air.

The Marquis’ knights had raised their lances in unison. It was a textbook motion that showed that they were professional soldiers. However, it still seemed difficult for them to plunge into the mass of fleeing infantry and engage in a chaotic melee with the ogres.

A knight’s mounted charge was one of the most destructive forces on the battlefield, but in melee combat, cavalry would lose their advantage.

“Why aren’t you shooting yet?!”

The shout belonged to Barbro.

Allowing the ogres to get closer would only increase the losses they would take. It would be better to abandon these soldiers and kill their fellow villagers along with the enemy.

Just as Barbro’s aggravation began to mount, the ogres suddenly began to retreat. They used the fleeing soldiers as meat shields, preventing the cavalry from pursuing, and in the end they fell back into the gate.

After receiving the survivors, Barbro began reorganizing the formation, his hands gripping the reins tighter and tighter as his anger built.

He had originally planned to finish this boring mission swiftly, and then rush back to the battlefield to gain glory in battle against the Empire.

Now, this unsightly mess was all that was left of his dream.

Although the appearance of ogres was unexpected, if they couldn’t even bring back the necessary people to E-Rantel, it would stain his reputation even further. It would be a decisive setback in the race for the throne against Zanack, the backup successor.

Or could it be— had all this been planned out beforehand?

He clucked his tongue in annoyance, knowing the surrounding nobles’ eyes were on him.

However, he had no time to bother about them. Barbro turned a keen eye on the knight approaching him. He was the commander of the Marquis’ elite troops.

“…What the hell was that? Has that village been taken over by ogres? What’s going on?!”

“Th-that shouldn’t be the case, sir. Nobody could have expected there would be monsters there… there should have been tax collectors visiting recently. But we received no word that this village was taken over by ogres. If they went and didn’t return, that would be abnormal… what on earth happened in that village…”

He could feel the confusion in the knight’s words. If there was a scheme to make Barbro lose his dignity and fall into a trap, he probably wasn’t aware of it either.

That meant that he was on the Prince’s side for now.

“In any case, we don’t know enough about the enemy. Well, that’s only to be expected. Only five ogres showed up. If they had more, they would have continued attacking us. So in all likelihood, they probably don’t have more than ten in total. You should be able to take down five ogres, no?”

“Of course! Every one of us is as strong as a member of the Kingdom’s Warrior Band. A mere five ogres are nothing to us!”

“I’m not doubting you. I’m just saying, you need to be on the lookout. Ogres are stupid monsters, but their actions just now were too intelligent. They opened the door to lure us in, and then counterattacked at the best time. It looks like the other side has a commander. If one of the villagers was leading them…”

“Forgive my rudeness. No mere peasant could control an ogre. I believe there must be some other force at work here. If we could just learn more about the enemy—”

Barbro could no longer control his impatience.

“What are you babbling about? Look there!”

Barbro pointed at the gate, at the tattered royal flag.

“The country’s flag is now in that sad state. You will destroy that village no matter the cost. Gather your troops, loose flame arrows, and burn the village down. Now is the time to put that accumulated experience in sieges to good use! It looks like we won’t be able to finish this without any losses. So you will attack with the intention of razing that village to the ground!”

“Please wait! It might be that some ogre sorcerer or some other intelligent demi-human might be the mastermind here, and not the villagers!”

“And if that were the case, so what?”

Barbro looked at the knight, his face a picture of befuddlement, and began explaining slowly to him, like an adult lecturing a child.

“Are you listening? Good. It doesn’t matter if the villagers have control of the ogres, or if they’re controlled by some intelligent demi-human. Those villagers have rebelled against the rightful ruler of their land, the royal family. That being the case, we must display the consequences of such foolishness to the world.”

“But, there might be some villagers being held as hostages, aren’t they innocent?!”

“Were you listening to what I said earlier? So what if they are?”

Barbro shrugged at the knight, who seemed to have trouble accepting what he’d just heard.

“I get it, I get it. I understand how you feel. Then I will show them the greatest amount of leniency possible. Capture those villagers who don’t resist, and then we will put them on trial later. Is that better?”

“Understood, sir!”

The knight bowed deeply to Barbro. After hearing his forceful response, Barbro nodded in approval.

“However, I have one condition. I want an overwhelming victory. If we take losses here, all sorts of gossip will spread. The same goes for you. People will talk about how the Marquis’ trump card was sent out to a pissant village to be bloodied.”

“But that was because of the ogres—”

“—You can’t use that as an excuse. That’s just how the world works.”

“Understood!”

“If you understand, then get to work. Get the troops from the rear gate. At the same time, cut down trees from the forest and start making battering rams. I’ll leave the details to you. Minimize casualties while ensuring victory. Kill anyone who flees.”

◆ ◆ ◆

A steady stream of oil-filled pots impacted on the sides of the wall, followed by flame arrows.

The explosive impacts were comparable to the bursting of a ‘Fireball’, creating bright red flames which gave off endless plumes of black smoke.

Jugem could feel the uneasiness radiating off the nearby members of the defense force. The goblin leader raised his magic greatsword and roared.

“Hold fast! Flames like these can’t breach the wall! As for the defense of the gate—”

The sound of a heavy impact, *doom*, came from the outside of the gate.

The walls were much thicker and bigger than the watchtower, which now lay in ashes. Even when struck by flaming arrows, they did not catch fire easily. As such, they concluded that this was just a feint to draw attention from their real objective, which was breaching the gate. It seemed that this was the right decision. Once more, a great *doom* came from the gate.

It was a deeper, more powerful sound than the impacts of the ogre’s clubs. It was the sound of siege weapons - most likely battering rams.

“Loose!”

In time with Jugem’s shout, the villagers fired their arrows with practiced ease.

Cries of pain rose from the other side of the wall. However, the battering rams did not stop.

They must have been using multiple rams in a sequential attack.

“Loose!”

Once more, the arrows flew aloft on Jugem’s command. However, this time, they were answered by arrows from the enemy. Several times the number of arrows fell upon the village like rain.

Yet, not a single one struck the defenders.

The enemy attack had been a series of ranging shots, so they had all missed, impacting harmlessly on walls and buildings.

However, the more archers they had on their side, the higher their chances of hitting. As such, if their accuracy was a non-zero number, things would be bad.

“Fall back! Fall back! We’re moving to a new position!”

The villagers obeyed Jugem, who could still make himself heard despite his lowered volume. They hurriedly shifted their location amidst their growing panic.

To date, the villagers had only learned to shoot from fixed positions. Their aim was to accurately target the area just outside the main gate. As such, when they could do both, their accuracy was increased, but conversely, once they had to move to an unfamiliar location, their arrows would no longer hit their marks well.

Fighting a ranged battle now would be very difficult.

“Spears up! We’re moving into close combat!”

A loud *ping* came from the other side of the wall. It sounded like something metallic striking the wall, completely different from the *dooms* of the battering rams. In all likelihood, it was the sound of axes, and they were coming from everywhere.

Numbers were a huge advantage. They could use the door or wall attacks as feints in order to attack from a completely unexpected direction. If Jugem were the commander for the other side, he would do that too.

Just as planned… it looks like the situation's going well and the enemy is dispersing.

Most conventional attack strategies would be useless in the face of the opposition's numerical superiority. For the villagers of Carne, their best bet would be to steadily erode their enemies' fighting strength.

As long as the enemy formation weakened, they could attack from the village at any time. Ideally, they would strike at the enemy commander in a wedge formation. That way, the panicked enemy would immediately consolidate their troops.

Bringing the ogres back halfway was part of the preparations for that event. Even if the ogres pressed their attack by themselves, it would be difficult for them to make the enemy panic and achieve their objective of drawing the troops at the back gate out to the front.

Granted, once the scattered enemies rush forward to encircle us, we'll have no way of retreat… well, I guess that's what they call entering *the dragon’s lair despite knowing he’s home…*

In other words, this was a suicidal tactic.

Even so—

“Well, we’ve achieved half of our objectives already.”

Jugem muttered to himself as his line of sight moved to the rear gate that he couldn’t see from here.

He had already prepared an escape route for his master with the highest probability of survival. There was nothing more to worry about. It might be cruel to say so, but as long as all the villagers here died, nobody would know how many had fled and Enri would remain cloaked in a shroud of mystery.

Protecting Enri was Jugem’s first and highest priority. He would pay any price for that and not regret it in the slightest. Because of that—

“Everyone! Wait for the door to go down! We’re going to charge! Our target is the enemy headquarters! Our only chance of survival is to kill their commander!”

“Ohhhh!”

A series of determined howls answered him. There was a slight wavering in some of the voices, but nobody looked like they were going to back out.

All that remained was the raw courage of men who fought for their children and their loved ones.

◆ ◆ ◆

Enri and Nfirea ran down from the rear observation deck, herding the women and children toward the area in front of the rear gate. Nfirea’s grandmother Lizzie was not there, because she was currently hiding all the alchemical wares she had borrowed from Ainz.

She would have no time to escape, but she had already accepted her fate.

“No problem! There’s nobody around! We’ll open the gate now and head for the forest!”

The gathered children, faces pale from fright, nodded desperately.

Meanwhile, Nfirea and Britta turned the handle, slowly opening one side of the gate.

At the moment they opened the gate, Enri stuck her head out to look around. There was nothing. Just as she saw from the observation deck, there were no troops in sight. Jugem’s plan had succeeded.

“Then, let’s go!”

The first to exit were Agu and his tribesmen. If they were ambushed in the forest, they would carve a bloody path through their enemies. Next was Britta. She was the group’s scout, and if Agu couldn’t find any soldiers, she would handle things.

Taking the children’s short legs into consideration, the pioneer team would advance toward the forest. Behind them, the children would follow them two by two. The mothers would accompany the children as they ran. Children without parents would be led by older children.

The last ones were Enri and Nfirea, who would then run to the front.

Even after getting out of the gate, the forest was still far away. Considering this was the dead of winter, the distance felt several times longer than it normally did.

They frantically pumped their legs and ran.

It was too far.

It was not enough.

At this moment, they heard horses from behind them.

Enri was extremely fit, so much so that she was turned off by it. Even so, her heart was pounding and her breathing was in disarray. Fear drove her to look behind, and there she glimpsed something she could not believe was there — despair.

“No way…”

Over a hundred mounted knights had appeared from behind them. They must have been hiding in the blind spots of the observation deck, sticking close to the walls. They had only emerged because they were sure nobody else was going to come out.

It was a long distance from the village to the forest. However, there was a huge difference between the speeds of horses and humans.

Maybe Agu and Britta could flee. But it was impossible for the children. They would be overtaken.

The knights held gleaming objects in their hands. There was no doubt they were planning to cut them down from behind. Although Nemu was running at the head of the column, it was doubtful if she would be able to escape.

“Enri, keep running!”

Nfirea suddenly halted in place.

“Enfi!”

“I’ll buy us some time!”

“Are you crazy? Don’t think this will be like last time when Lupusregina-san saved you!”

“Just run!”

Nfirea’s angry shout was directed at Enri, who had stopped as well.

“If you want to buy time, I have a better way!”

Enri withdrew the battered old horn from her pocket.

It could only summon 19 goblins. Although there weren’t a lot of them, each one was still quite strong. It should be enough to buy some time.

“Idiot! There’s so many of them! You won’t even be able to get 20 people!”

She couldn’t argue against Nfirea’s reasoning. They would definitely be outflanked. However, not blowing the horn would be even more stupid.

“Isn’t it the same with you?!”

Enri no longer had time to waste on talking. She placed the horn to her lips.

—Goblin-sans! Please help me!

What rang out was a basso profundo note that made the very land tremble.

Enri blinked at what she had done. In the past, when she had summoned Jugem and the others, all she had gotten was a soft *poot*. All she should have gotten was the noise a shabby child’s toy would have made.

“En-Enri…”

The panicked Nfirea’s line of sight went past Enri, looking at something beyond her. Enri’s eyes followed Nfirea’s to behind her.

The mounted knights were about to catch up with them, and they should have had all the freedom in the world to do it, but for some reason they were pulling on their reins to halt their horses. Due to the sudden stop, some had even fallen off their mounts.

Enri looked behind them, and—

“—Eh? Ehhhhhh?!”

♦ ♦ ♦

Many items in YGGDRASIL could receive custom names. However, a very few were exceptions to the rule. Those included dropped artifact items.

One such artifact was the Horn of the Goblin General.

The horn was a small and plain item, but there was a curious quirk about it.

It could only summon 19 goblins. These 19 goblins were trash mobs that weren’t even worthy as a YGGDRASIL player’s opponents. So why would such an item be given the grandiose name of “General”? It wouldn’t have been odd just to call it a “Goblin Horn”.

Many players in YGGDRASIL thought that way. In the end, none of them could justify a name like this, and they left it at that.

However, there was a reason for that name.

And that reason was—

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Jugem swung the magic greatsword he had taken from the Giant of the East. The strike that he had made with all his strength was blocked by his opponent. However, he couldn’t fully neutralize the force of the blow, and it broke his balance. Normally, Jugem would have immediately followed up, but the other soldiers harrying him would not let him do so.

They flanked Jugem from both sides, in order to cover the soldier who had left himself open.

Clicking his tongue, Jugem weaved the sword through the air like an extension of his own body, neatly parrying the two sword strokes that came at him.

“…This goblin’s pretty good. He’s actually forcing the three of us back at once.”

“What an unbelievable fellow. I didn’t know goblins could be this strong.”

Jugem could sense that his opponents weren’t at their limit yet, which made him worry.

If he fought these soldiers one on one, he could win. If he fought two at once it would be a matter of luck. Three at once meant he would most likely lose. And now—

There was still another soldier circling behind him. Jugem took a small step back.

—Against four people at once, all he could do was die.

His first few opponents had been some weak soldiers, which he broke through easily.

The brave warriors of Carne Village advanced inexorably toward the Kingdom’s battle-lines in a wedge formation.

But then, strong opponents had started appearing, as though they had entered a different area. Their equipment was of a high standard. They must have been the elite troops of the enemy army.

Although they weren’t far from the enemy camp, they had not taken that many losses yet.

However — it was still hard.

He turned his attention away from the four of them and surreptitiously observed his surroundings. The goblins under him had slowly been overwhelmed by superior numbers.

He was stronger and tougher than his opponents… but on the flip side, those were his only two advantages — much like the ogres. All they could do was watch their opponents retreat after taking a single blow.

There were already several martyrs for Carne Village. Even though the goblins had taken the brunt of the attacks on the leading edges of the wedge, the enemies’ numbers were far too oppressive, and it was impossible to endure all their attacks. Invariably, a few people would make it in, and invariably, someone would end up embracing the ground.

It was a reckless strategy, and this outcome was only to be expected.

However, Jugem wanted to believe that this might not be the case.

And in this moment—

The sword struck him, causing a flesh wound.

“Cheh!”

Jugem swung his greatsword, opening up a gap.

“You guys, who are you? Not ordinary farmers, I’ll bet.”

Jugem was level 12. With that in mind, his current opponent was roughly level 10, or maybe 11. The other three might be level 9.

An ordinary villager was level 1. Maybe some of the trained villagers made it to level 2. The troops accompanying the tax collectors from E-Rantel didn’t seem quite like level 3. This meant the soldiers he was fighting now were very strong.

As an aside, it was difficult to accurately judge Enri’s and Nfirea’s strength because they weren’t combatants, but they were strong in their own way.

“This goblin… no, is it a hobgoblin? Or is it only natural to meet strong opponents like this?”

“But, they say hobgoblins are bigger… is it a goblin king? Maybe those guys took control of the village by force… but if that was the case, why would the villagers fight so hard?”

“Haaaa! Humans have such dull minds. It’s because we have hostages! Don’t you get it?”

“He must be lying. They wouldn’t fight for such a lousy reason. Rather, they’d stab you in the back. I can sense there’s something like a camaraderie between you guys that goes beyond the barriers of race. Why? Why would humans and goblins fight side by side?”

“As if I’d tell you, dumbass!”

“So I guess they are comrades after all, if not—”

“Ahhhh, shut the hell up! Busybodies like you piss me off!”

Jugem swung the greatsword once more.

But the outcome was the same as before.

He could take the hit, but not completely. The soldier’s balance broke, but when he wanted to follow up, he was interrupted by the attacks targeting his vitals coming from both sides

With that in mind, Jugem decided to forgo avoiding the blows.

The attacks, aimed at the unarmored parts of his body, cut him open.

Rather than pain, all Jugem felt was heat oozing out of two points on his body.

Jugem grit his teeth, and activated his special skill. His sword changed direction, striking at the soldier that slashed at him from the side.

“「Goblin Blow」!”

The mighty stroke cleaved through the weak spots of the soldier’s chainmail and dealt a grievous wound to the flesh beneath. In this moment, the soldier started twitching.

This was the power of the greatsword — poison. However, it was still resistible, and it couldn’t completely take an opponent out of the fight.

Because he was distracted, Jugem could not avoid the sword blow that came from behind him.

Although his armor meant that his wound wasn’t a serious one, his body groaned from the sword thrust.

“Shit!”

“That’s our line! You got Bike!”

“Let Bike fall back, get behind this guy!”

During the wild melee, there were more opponents than just these four. Some had tried to attack the openings Jugem left and had been cut apart for their trouble. Judging by their poor equipment, they were probably conscripted farmers.

Even so, there were a lot of them. Being outnumbered was truly unfair.

“Get back! This goblin is strong! We’ll take care of him. You lot go deal with the villagers behind him!”

“You think I’ll let you?!”

Jugem snarled at the conscripts and waved his swords. Intimidated by him, they backed away.

The heat he was feeling in his body was slowly turning to pain.

As a warrior who swung his sword to live, Jugem had learned several secrets of the battlefield, the first of which was how to fight on in spite of his pain. Another secret was to tell how much damage he had taken, and when to flee. His instincts told him that he could still fight, but for how long, he didn’t know.

Another brave warrior of Carne Village met his end, his blood soaking into the earth.

Their defeat was certain, and his vision was slowly turning red.

Even so, he still had to buy time for Enri and the others to flee, to his very last breath.

—Objective: the enemy camp.

—Forces: myself.

Perhaps he had seen Jugem’s resolve, but the soldier in front of him stiffened up.

In that moment, Jugem gripped his sword, preparing himself for a charge. A great clamor washed over the battlefield. With his eyes firmly fixed on the opponent in front of him Jugem could not look away.

That was because from the side of Carne Village—

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—The reason was simple. Its true power was not simply a matter of summoning 19 goblins.

In YGGDRASIL, this item had been unable to reveal its true value and was discarded as a trash drop.

However, in this New World, it had the chance to unleash its true power.

Let us go over the name of the item once more.

“Horn of the Goblin General”.

Its true power, revealed only when three conditions were met, was—

Part 3

The rhythmic beating of heavy drums reverberated throughout the battlefield from just beside the village. The moment he looked at the direction the sound was coming from, his eyes opened wide. A roughly five-thousand strong formation was marching in cadence and in a well-disciplined formation.

Both the villagers and Prince Barbro thought it was the Prince’s reinforcements. The only difference was whether they knew of anyone who might be sending the reinforcement or not. But everyone changed their mind after taking a closer look.

The formation was made up of goblins. The demi-humans called “goblins” were smaller than average humans and roughly the size of a child. However, their aura made them look bigger than they actually were.

Their bodies were sheathed in steel armor, and their well-used weapons gleamed with lethality. This was equipment befitting of true warriors. They were no militia, but an army comprised of professional soldiers.

“Now! Anyone alive, run like hell! It’s the reinforcement! We have reinforcements! Run towards them!”

Jugem shouted out loudly.

Their identity was a mystery. It was unclear whether they were enemies, allies, or an unrelated third party. Running towards them just because they were the same species was in itself not a good decision. The correct course of action would have been to run towards the village.

However, Jugem felt something that told him that they were comrades. A feeling that that they somehow served the same master. A feeling that he would be welcomed by them.

The survivors from Carne Village raced towards the goblin army without hesitation.

The encirclement loosened with every step he took. Even though the Kingdom’s army knew it had to give chase, they were sluggish. It was only natural. Carelessly approaching such a well-disciplined army was a foolish course of action.

There were two other reasons why they just allowed the villagers to escape. The first was because the main camp had signalled for retreat, after deciding that it was the time to reform the line rather than to give chase. The other reason was because they were afraid of possible retaliation for chasing down the members of the same species as the new army.

The goblins received Jugem and the others who were fleeing with all their strength. Jugem and the company stumbled through the loose gaps in the formation and the army closed the gaps once they were through. It was like a steel door sliding shut.

Jugem looked around at his comrades, who were collapsed on the ground from exhaustion. There was no one who was unscathed, and many had fainted after reaching safety. Even for Jugem, just looking around caused his vision to blur. The number of goblins, the number of ogres and the number of villagers had all decreased from before the battle.

“Well I suppose I should consider it lucky… that over half of us survived. Konaa!”

He called for the only goblin capable of using healing magic, but Konaa shook his head. He had exhausted all of his mana during combat.

“Then anyone who knows first-aid…”

The moment Jugem tried to shout, a goblin holding a feathered fan, wearing a headscarf and sporting a long beard walked over.

His attitude made Jugem guess that he was someone important in the goblin army.

“Hohoho, so you are part of General Enri’s retinue. I am the one in charge of this army, the Goblin Strategist. No one will be able to harm you any further since we have arrived. Please, rest easy. We will escort you to the medical corps immediately.”

The Goblin Strategist extended his fan and a group of stout-looking goblins ran over with stretchers.

“Now, now, please carry them over as soon as possible. It would bring shame on us if anyone died under our care.”

The injured were swiftly carried off.

“It seems that you are injured as well. It would be best for you to check in with the medical unit and come back…”

“No, sorry. I apologise, since you’ve been so kind to us, but I want to hear something first. I’m not that badly hurt.”

After making sure that Jugem was not putting up a show of bravado, the Goblin Strategist nodded once before speaking.

“Of course, as expected of the leader of General Enri’s retinue. What do you wish to know — Hohoho, no, there would be only one thing you would be more interested in than your own safety. General Enri is in the tent behind us. She would be very happy if you went to see her.”

“Is that so? That’s good.”

Jugem breathed a sigh of relief from the depths of his heart. He was so relieved, he felt all the strength leaving his body and wanted to collapse, but he could not show such an ugly sight to his junior.

“Then I’ll go over there. I don’t think my group will be participating in the upcoming fight either.”

“Hohoho, I thank you for giving us newcomers a chance to show off.”

“Well, it’s ok. It’s the job of seniors to yield opportunities to the juniors.”

“Hohoho, then I shall put on a good show for the seniors. Now then… the only thing left to do is to obtain an absolute victory. Order the heavy infantry to advance.”

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“What is that! We were just about to finish them off! Damn it!”

Barbro opened his eyes wide and glared at the intruders who had ruined everything.

Nothing had gone as he had planned. Why was he facing a goblin army at this tiny village? He wanted to tear out his hair in a fit of rage.

If this was the Empire’s army, he would have been delighted and ordered an attack immediately, but his opponents were goblins. Even if he won, who would recognize his achievements?

“My Prince, please grant us permission to retreat.”

He turned his hateful gaze towards the knight who was recommending a course of action. He did not know why such a sizeable goblin army had appeared here, but if he took back useful intelligence, he would be evaluated as having done something useful.

However, if he just turned tail and ran, it was not difficult to imagine that he would gain the nickname of “the prince who ran from goblins”.

If he lost, he would become “the prince who lost to goblins”. The news would spread via the nobles who were hungry for the latest gossip, and there would be no one in the Kingdom who would not know of it. Those who had not been there would not care how strong those goblins had been. The only thing that mattered was how juicy the gossip was.

Barbro silently cursed the nobles who made fun of him from safety.

“…I will not grant such a thing. Fight.”

“My Prince! Look at their immaculate equipment and their flawless formation. They must be elites surpassing the goblins from before. For an army comprised of conscripts like us, the chances of victory are slim. Please order a retreat!”

He knew it only too well, even if he did not want to hear it, but there was no way to protect his honour except by fighting. He could only hope that the goblin army was just for show.

“You fool! Don’t you understand how dangerous it is to just ignore an army like that! Right now, the Kingdom’s army is moving towards the Kattse Plains. What would you do if they attacked E-Rantel while it was undefended!”

“I, I apologize.”

The only course of action was to engage them, then retreat if the goblins were indeed as strong as they appeared. His real objective was to fight with the Empire, and a loss here would be undesirable. He was calm enough to at least think of that much.

The soldiers had just finished reforming their ranks in front of Barbro when the goblins started advancing.

The enemy took a standard line formation, three ranks deep.

Conversely, the Royal Army was in a crane wing formation. The reason they did not employ a wedge formation was to maximize the mobility of the cavalry and because the enemy was in a formation vulnerable to flanking attacks.

The goblin’s frontline consisted of heavy infantry with shields large enough to cover their entire body. Their steady march forward march gave off an immense pressure as if a wall was closing in at a rapid pace. Barbro felt the unpleasant sensation of his gauntlets filling with sweat as he gripped his reins tighter.

The levies holding spears and the heavy infantry clashed. The infantry’s goal was to stall the enemy’s advance while the cavalry flanked from the sides.

The two sides crashed into each other.

And Barbro could clearly hear the goblins’ shouts.

“We are… Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Heavy Infantry Corps! Don’t think something like this can stop us!”

Before he could even wonder who General Enri might be, the creaking sounds from the Kingdom’s troops grabbed his attention.

The conscripts were being pushed back by the shield wall. Naturally, the men in the front rank were pressed against those standing behind them, and the formation started to break. The cavalry on both wings were surprised and began moving. The right wing was faster to respond, so they tried to flank the goblin army, but seventeen knights —wreathed in brilliant, silver light and riding on silver wolves instead of horses— raced out to intercept them.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Paladin-Knight Squad! Our loyalty belongs to General Enri!”

The ones attacking the left flank were mounted on beasts that looked like wolves. On their backs were goblins, and at their head was a winged wolf. The goblin riding on top of the winged wolf shouted, and his voice cut across the infantry’s’ screams and reached Barbro’s ears.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Beast Rider Corps are coming for you!”

Amidst the chaos of cavalry battle was the sound of arrows. When Barbro looked closer, countless arrows were pouring on top of his army and he looked closer at the enemy’s formation to identify who was firing them.

In the enemy’s second rank, there were goblins holding large bows and clad in eye-catching red clothes. The right and left sides of their body was uneven, and they looked to be swaying every time they took a step. The goblin who had caught his attention had an even larger bow than the others, and then he opened his mouth.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Longbowman Corps! Don’t think you can escape from us!”

The enemy’s ranged attack did not end there. Countless magic blasts flew over from their third rank and, while still reasonably far away in front of Barbro, they exploded in the middle of his army’s formation. Flowers of crimson fire bloomed with every flash and explosions snaked through the air like flower petals. The conscript soldiers were being blown up left and right by the continuous magical attacks.

The ones who were responsible for this wore hoods that covered their faces. In their hands were long staves that glowed with mysterious light. The one standing in front of them pulled back his hood to reveal his wrinkled face.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Magic Support Corps. Realize our power with your very body, and know that we can use not just enhancement or weakening magic, but attack magic as well.”

That was not the only squad that was firing off magical strikes. Besides the Magic Support Corps was a similarly-attired squad. They were few in number, at just 5 men, but they had expressions of the utmost confidence on their faces. The goblin who was sneering the most at the front raised his voice.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Magic Bombardment Squad! We specialize in area attack magic and are proud to be the squad with the greatest offensive capabilities!”

“Your Highness!”

The knight returned to Barbro. He could almost predict what the knight was about to say with such a desperate face. If there were magic casters, then the enemy’s capabilities would be several times higher than expected.

“We can’t hold them anymore! It’s impossible! It’ll only be a matter of time before the enemy reaches here as well! Please order a retreat!”

It was not the time to consider whether he wanted to fall back or not. Even if he ordered everyone to stand and fight, the nobles who had followed him until now would turn and run with their tails in between their legs. Making them stay and fight would only be a cause for future grudges and turn those nobles into enemies.

“Fine. Give the retreat order to the Baron first.”

He wanted to be the first to run away, but that would saddle him with the reputation of a coward who was the first to flee against goblins. He would leave that dirty affair to the Baron.

“Understood!”

The moment the knight ordered his subordinate—

“—Where do you think you’re going?”

Barbro first realized the danger to his life when he heard an unfamiliar voice from his side.

The Prince’s retinue drew their swords and looked around to find the source of the voice. What appeared suddenly from the shadow were figures clad in black clothes. Their faces were covered with masks, but their eyes seem to let out a sharp glow.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Assassin Squad. The reason we revealed ourselves from the darkness is because this will be your end.”

And another person.

The one who followed behind them wore a red cap, steel boots, and held a long scythe, like an embodiment of death.

“Her Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Bodyguard — a member of the thirteen Redcaps. Well, I guess I won’t even have an opportunity to show off.”

“Protect his highness! Signal for retreat!”

“Too late.”

The shadow moved. For Barbro, that was only thing he could see.

The knight’s head disappeared and blood spurted like a gory fountain from his neck.

The moment his brain registered what he was looking at, Barbro immediately spurred his horse to a gallop. There was no time to think about an orderly retreat because he was standing on the crossroads between life and death.

As he fled, he could hear a sound from behind him: “Her

Excellency, General Enri’s Goblin Musician Corps!” followed by a loud beating of goblin drums that chased him as he ran.

“…Is it alright to just let him go?”

“It’s the strategist’s order. He said if we kill the prince, the battle won’t be over until the very end.”

“Hmph, I suppose so. If General Enri died, I wouldn’t stop until every single enemy was dead either. As expected of the strategist, to see several steps ahead. Is it for the same reason we’re not going to exterminate the soldiers as well?”
“That’s right. They need to make it back to that city with the prince in tow. I can understand your feelings of displeasure. I feel it, too. I want vengeance on them for daring to attack General Enri’s village… Well, Redcap-san, let’s take care of the corpses.”

“I suppose. We need to retrieve the bodies of the brave warriors who fought alongside the seniors’ leader as well.”

Part 4

Upon the plain dyed with bright moonlight was a camp. There was a question of whether it could truly be considered a camp without any tents of wooden fences. The more accurate description would be there was an army in the plain.

Most of them were ragged and lying down in exhaustion.

The reason they could sleep without any bedding on a winter day that was cold enough to turn breath into white fog was because everyone was absolutely spent. Amidst the group that was collapsed on the ground like puppets with strings cut was one person who was walking around.

It was the general who had lost the battle, Prince Barbro.

Should he consider himself lucky that he had survived, or consider it unlucky to have encountered such a force?

The goblin army that suddenly appeared at Carne Village was strong — no, it was overwhelming. Barbro's forces were smashed the moment they made contact and defeat was inevitable. His soldiers died as if they were melting away.

So who were those goblins?

Barbro wanted to know the answer.

The only thing he could think of was that those goblins had established a huge kingdom in the Great Forest of Tob. If they were marching south, it was an understandable situation. The nobles who managed to escape with him thought the same, and they had shared the exact same conclusion with him while escaping.

Meaning that he was unlucky.

Meaning that those goblins were their most elite.

Meaning that returning with information on the goblins would be a reasonable achievement in itself.

“Idiots….”

Barbro clenched his fist.

A loss was a loss, and those goblins were undoubtedly strong. Anyone who fought with them would be able to understand why Barbro had lost.

But to those who were ignorant, Barbro would be the prince who lost to goblins. He would become a laughingstock.

“Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!”

Frustration was boiling in his heart. This was why he could not go to sleep even though he was just as exhausted as his soldiers.

Every time he closed his eyes, he could hear the voices of mockery and hatred that were sure to come his way when he returned to the Kingdom.

For Barbro, the war was over. It was impossible to go to the Kattse Plains and join the battle against the Empire now.

Suddenly — he felt a presence. Not from where the soldiers were sleeping, but from the direction they had fled.

Was it the stragglers who finally managed to catch up to them, or pursuing goblins?

In that moment, Barbro turned to look with an anxious heart, his face wrinkled in surprise. As though the figure had noticed that Barbro was watching, it waved with a light greeting.

“How ya doing~”

How did it appear in the middle of this vast open plain without being spotted? Not too far from him —roughly twenty meters away— was an absolute beauty with a smile that matched her sincere expression. If this was in the middle of a city, he would not hesitate to ogle her, but this was in the middle of a plain. There was not even a village in sight.

The strangest thing was her attire — that looked very similar to a maid’s clothing.

If she was armed, he would have thought she was an adventurer, but this just did not make any sense.

A monster?

The thought suddenly popped into his mind. Some monsters possessed a beautiful appearance. Fairies were an example of that, but maid’s clothing was impossible to comprehend.

“Hello, I came over to play~. I didn’t catch you at a bad time, right?”

It was a question that was clearly looking down on him.

“Who are you?”

He asked that question while reaching for the sword on his waist.

It was a boring and unimaginative question, but he meant it. The girl’s identity was so shrouded in mystery, he could not even think of what to ask in the first place.

“They call me Lupusregina. I’m one of the maids who serve Ainz-sama.”

This mysterious woman greeted him by raising her hand again. Something about what that woman —Lupusregina— said sunk into his heart.

“W-what.”

Barbro was so surprised, that he forgot to wake the soldiers around him.

“No, no, let’s not dwell on that… you really did go through a lot. But ya know, I think it was kinda cheating. I mean using a goblin army’s way too cowardly. Even I was surprised when I was watching that human, Enri, from behind and yelped in surprise. Who’d have expected so many goblins to come pouring out… hehehe.”

Lupusregina made a sound resembling laughter.

It was an obvious taunt, but Barbro was in no mood to put up with it.

“So what are you here for!”

He could feel someone stirring behind him as if reacting to the shout.

A taunt was a taunt, but her actions were strange if she was planning on an ambush. There was no need for her to show herself. Or was this an act to draw away his attention? To strike from behind while he was distracted.

No — he was valuable because he was the first Prince.

Their plan was probably to negotiate with him if he was lucky, or to use him as a hostage if he was not.

But there was no way negotiations would end well for his side. He would most likely become a prisoner.

Barbro could feel the throne getting further and further away from him every second.

Although, the ones who were actually responsible were the upper echelons of the Kingdom, who had sent him to that village without informing him that goblins were there.

If he became a prisoner, he would have an opportunity to meet with Ainz Ooal Gown. Depending on the situation, he would cede one-quarter of the Kingdom’s territory in exchange for Ainz’s help in making him the king.

This was perhaps the best he could get out of the worst situation.

Barbro thought this.

“No, no. There’s only one reason I came ‘round.”

Lupusregina declared after a deep breath.

“I came to massacre everyone!”

He blinked several times before shouting.

“What?! What nonsense are you spouting! Don’t you know who you’re talking to?! I am the First Prince of the Kingdom of

Re-Estize, Barbro Andrean Ield Ryle Vaiself!”

“Ha. Well, you say that, but aren’t you still a mere human? Am I wrong? For us, it’s all the same. Ah, I already knew you were a prince, too.”

“Is that… Right! You mean to kill everyone besides me? I can’t say that’s a good idea. Even if you take me prisoner, you’ll need someone to take the news back to the king, or the negotiation will get more difficult in many ways.”

Lupusregina tilted her as if he was saying something strange.

“No, no. What are you blabbering about? I’ll say it again. Ma~ssa~cre. It’s a massacre because I’m going to kill every single one of you. It seems like your brain’s not too developed? Ah~ you might be valuable in that sense, but I’m not too keen on keeping you around.”

“What the hell are you saying! Don’t you realize my value! I am the First Prince! How dare you even think about killing me! You normally take nobles hostage and ransom them! Or do you want territory! It’s better to keep me alive to use for more advantageous position in negotiation than to kill me!”

“…Oh man, this is one perplexing human being.”

Lupusregina showed an unpleasant smile on her face, then continued in a tone that sounded as if she was trying to explain something complex to a baby.

“You’re not needed in the plan of the highest one, of Ainz-sama. That’s why you’re going to die. Do you understand now?”

Barbro was flabbergasted.

He could tell that Lupusregina was not saying it out of jest nor as a simple threat.

He swallowed his saliva unconsciously.

“…Are you really going to? Really going to kill me…”

“Ah, that’s a good expression. It’s my favourite kind. You’re going up and up in my favourite ranking.”

“Then—”

Lupusregina spoke to Barbro with a blank expression. Barbro was trying to smile despite the rigid expression on his face.

“The order from Ainz-sama is to massacre you all. Thus, nobody can leave this place alive.”

She suddenly changed her expression and spoke jokingly.

“So, I’ve thought about this and that. ‘Which opponent would you have the most fun with?’ So — I brought the best opponent for all of you, who had so much trouble with those goblins.”

She raised her hand and went “ta-da”. Suddenly, multiple shadows burst out from her shadow, cutting their way out of empty space.

“Here are the Redcaps mercenaries I summoned!”

They numbered thirty.

They were evil and twisted looking goblins that resembled the ones he had seen before.

They all wore pointed red hats and steel boots. In their hands were axes that seemed to give off a blue glow in the moonlight.

“Enemy attack! What are you doing! Wake up! To arms! The enemy’s here!”

The soldiers awoke from sleep at Barbro’s shouts and saw the enemy under the almost blindingly bright moonlight.

“…Level 43. It’s kind of overkill, but there weren’t any lower level goblins in the library.”

Screams erupted.

Since they were soldiers who had just been through a hellish battle against goblin soldiers, they did not have the heart to fight against goblins again.

They ran in a disorganized fashion without even trying to put up a fight.

“Don’t run! Fight! Fight! Stand and fight! Protect me right this instant!”

There was nobody who listened to Barbro. Even the nobles ran for their horses.

“Ahhahaha! This is a masterpiece! To think you can actually get away in a wide open plain like this! Ah~ this is too funny! It’s the best! I love it so much!”

Lupusregina’s mocking voice was something Barbro knew only too well.

There was only one way to survive. That was to kill the enemy.

“You think you can make it if you’re on a horse… I guess there’s morons who think like that. Can you cut off those idiots’ legs for me?”

The Redcaps ran out, cheering in anticipation of the impending slaughter.

They were like wild beasts.

They slid in between through the scattered men trying to run away.

And then… a scream echoed through the air.

It was one of the nobles trying to escape on horseback.

The screams continued.

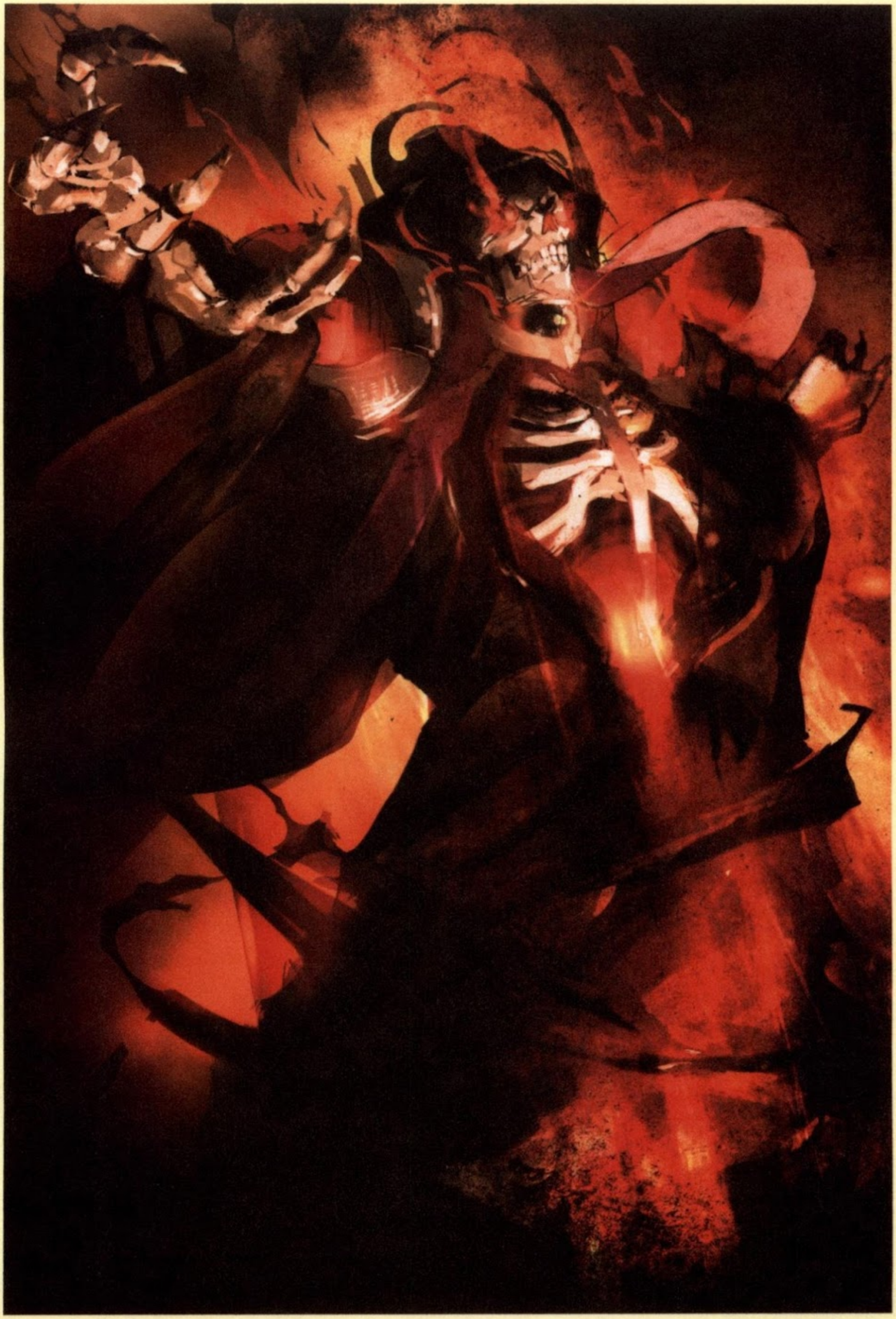
“Well, I guess I won’t have much time to enjoy myself since there’s not that many of them left over… But I guess it can’t be helped. I’ll try to make best of it, and enjoy myself as much as possible. I might not have abilities like Sol-chan, but I’ll show you that I’m not too bad either.”

Lupusregina walked over to Barbro, who had drawn his sword. She took comfortable steps as if she had just come out for a stroll.

But the smile that emerged like a fissure on her beautiful face made Barbro shiver.

It was only after thirty minutes that Barbro was finally permitted to embrace the sweet release of death.

Chapter 4 - Massacre



OVERLORD「9」The magic caster of Destroy

4章　大虐殺

Part 1

The two armies formed their battle lines along the gentle slopes on the crimson plains, staring each other down.

The awe-inspiring army of the Kingdom was 245'000 men strong, divided into a left wing of 70'000 men, a right wing of 70'000 men, and a central column of 105'000 men, spread throughout the topography of three hills into their battle formation. However, this was not so much a disciplined formation, but more like brutality in the form of overwhelming numbers.

The foremost five ranks of infantry carried two-handed pikes, each one easily over six meters long, and had positioned themselves into a spear line.

Their job was to serve as a spiked wall for the rest of the army, in order to counter the heavy cavalry that comprised the core of the Empire’s fighting strength. They did not use anti-cavalry palisades for a simple reason; protecting that many people would require far too much wood. In contrast, the skillful deployment and use of ranked pikes would be more effective.

Although this formation was quite solid and presented many problems for any attackers, it had its weaknesses as well.

Since the formation was dense and the weapons carried were very heavy, it was all they could do just to stay in place and prevent enemy charges. As such, they lacked the ability to react quickly to enemy maneuvers, and if the Empire used bowmen or magic, their losses would be heavy.

Then again, not much more was expected from mere peasants. All that was required was that they deflect the first charge of the enemy.

On the other side, the Empire had 60'000 men.

Their numbers were vastly inferior to those of the Kingdom.

However, the Imperial knights were relaxed, without so much as a hint of fear. They did not feel they would lose at all.

This confidence was born from knowing their own personal strength.

Even so, it was a fact that there was a vast disparity in the military power of both sides. Although it would not be a problem if they could fight forever without fatigue, that was not possible for humans. Once they got tired, even a gap in individual ability could be closed easily.

The Kingdom also had one more advantage, and it was a massive one.

That was the value of an individual life.

Most of the Kingdom’s troops were composed of peasant levies. In contrast, the Empire fielded professional soldiers called knights. There was a huge difference in the time and money taken to train a peasant —who was considered battle-ready if they could pick up a weapon and follow orders— and what was needed to produce a knight. Every loss by the Empire was more keenly felt than a similar loss by the Kingdom. The Empire simply could not afford to squander their knights in foolish offensives or wars of attrition.

With that in mind, an open field battle of attrition between the Empire and the Kingdom would be to the Kingdom’s advantage.

Because of this, the wars fought between the Empire and the Kingdom had typically been minor skirmishes.

The Empire’s objective would be accomplished simply by pulling the Kingdom’s serfs onto the battlefield. There was no need to waste the lives of nobles or skilled soldiers, and the Kingdom knew this as well.

This scripted pageantry was what passed for war between the Empire and the Kingdom.

Even if that magic caster called Ainz Ooal Gown took part, it would still end in a minor skirmish. That was what most of the Kingdom’s nobles thought. After all, the Empire’s knights were not just a military force, but a police force as well. Needless losses to them would threaten the Empire’s stability.

And so, the nobles awaited the Empire’s next move.

By tradition, the Imperial forces would parade before the Kingdom’s troops, and then fall back. The Kingdom would then sound a victory cry.

This was how it had always been.

However...

The Imperial army was not moving.

There was no sign of movement from the fortress-like castrum, no maneuver of troops to array themselves before the Kingdom’s forces. It was as though they were waiting for the Kingdom to make the first move, or for something else.

“Nothing’s happening. What’s going on?”

This was at the main camp, where the King was. The main camp was positioned near the rear of the central column, behind a host of 105'000 soldiers.

Marquis Raeven stood beside Gazef, speaking to him as he surveyed the motionless Imperial knights from his observation point atop a hill that was slightly higher than the others.

If the Empire did not move, then neither could the Kingdom.

An attack by the Kingdom now would be extremely foolish, given that they had already formed their spear line. Of course, it had been tried before; a pre-emptive strike on the Empire’s nobles. However, the attackers had been slaughtered in short order, and the Kingdom had suffered significant losses as a result.

Ever since, the Kingdom’s preferred tactic against the Empire had been to form a spear line and prepare to receive a charge. If they could bait the enemy into coming over, there would be no need for risky forays.

“All right, then. looks like they’re waiting for us…”

“The final negotiations have broken down, so they should be joining battle soon… Warrior-Captain— Gazef-dono, do you have an idea on what the Empire might be waiting for?”

Thirty minutes ago, representatives from both armies had begun negotiations in the central area between them. Granted, that was simply a statement of ridiculous conditions from both sides that could hardly be considered a negotiation. Its true purpose was to show that each side was willing to avert war until the last moment.

Of course, negotiations would break down, and that would be the signal for the fighting to begin

Under normal circumstances, the Imperial Army should have begun moving out immediately. However, this was not the case and they remained stationary.

“Even if you ask me, I have no answer to give you. Do you know anything about this?”

“As if. I’m not too familiar with military matters. I usually let my subordinates handle those.”

“I find it hard to believe the learned Marquis would know nothing of his enemy.”

“Know nothing… Gazef-dono does not mince words.”

“Did I give you offense? I apologize if I did.”

“Hahaha, no, none was taken. It’s a far better tone than compared to back then.”

Gazef’s brow furrowed, as irritation crept over him.

“Hahaha. Take it for what it is. It’s a fact that I’m no general and that’s not a lie. I’m lucky that my subordinates are good leaders of men, so I left military matters to them.”

“Could it be… one of the former adventurers working for you, who became famous during the demonic disturbance in the capital?”

“Ah... no. They’re over there.”

Raven pointed to a group of five men standing together.

Although they were all well into their middle age, and their strength was not what it used to be, they had been orichalcum-ranked adventurers in their prime, and there was something about the way they carried themselves that made Gazef feel that he should take them seriously.

“They will be my bodyguards during the battle.”

“With men like these protecting you, Marquis Raeven, I’m sure you will have no problems returning safely to the capital… well, as long as they don’t confront that great magic caster. Right, then how about the strategist?”

“I don’t think Gazef-dono will know him, since he’s a commoner from my domain. I learned his name from the time when he used a village militia to defeat an attacking goblin force that was twice their size. Ever since, I’ve entrusted him with the command of my house troops and various other tasks. The big surprise is that he’s never once lost a battle. He’s also my aide.”

“...I’d like to see the commander that Marquis Raeven praises so highly. If he’s really everything you say he is, we might do well to give him command of the Kingdom’s armed forces.”

“If you gave it to him… gave him complete command of the military, and the Royal army moved together under his command, we might be able to make our neighbors sit up and say, ‘The army of the Re-Estize Kingdom is not to be underestimated’...”

Gazef exchanged a look with Raeven, sighed, and smiled.

“The nobles would never allow a commoner to rise to such a station. It’s nothing more than idle fantasy at the moment.”

“Certainly not while the nobles are divided into their factions.”

The Empire organized its legions by appointing a general over each one, under whom served division commanders, brigade commanders, and other officers, all in strict regimentation.

In contrast, the Kingdom’s armies were composed of the house troops and levies each of the Kingdom’s nobles could muster. The King was the overall commander, but each host would act as they saw fit.

In other words, it was a rag-tag bunch of misfits.

Although Gazef had the title of Warrior-Captain, in the end, he was only the commander of the King’s personal troops, and he had no authority to give orders to the nobles. While it was possible for the King to order the nobles to listen to Gazef, many nobles would resent having to take orders from a commoner, and it would sow the seeds of future grudges. The King was aware of this, and would not give any orders to that effect.

The two of them considered their places in the Kingdom, and sighed heavily. Then, they exchanged looks, and laughed.

This conversation should have been had elsewhere, not on the eve of the clash of swords and the spilling of blood.

“Even if we return home alive, there’s another battlefield waiting there...”

“I heard that’s what being a noble was all about?”

“After this is over, I’ll petition the King to raise you to nobility. It angers me that the King’s champion doesn’t engage the nobles as actively as he should.”

Although Raeven looked like he was joking, Gazef could tell from the light in his eyes that he was serious.

Revealing one’s emotions honestly was a cause for celebration when it came from someone who hid their feelings well, but it was a different story if it was not a positive emotion. Gazef quickly changed the subject.

“...Let’s leave that aside for now. Why don’t we bring that strategist of yours over, and hear his opinion… ah, calling him over will be difficult.”

“After all, he’s been entrusted with my base camp. I don’t dare move him unnecessarily while we don’t know what the Empire’s up to.”

Although the nobles had all pledged to work together for the Kingdom, in the end, Raeven’s holdings were still his top priority. It was only natural that he would refuse.

“Haaaa… although we’ve done it so many times it’s become routine, maybe this isn’t the right course for this particular situation. Although nobody wants the Empire to fight for real, if they’re really going to attack, then it would be better for us and our morale if we just got it over with.”

Gazef could sense the unease from the Kingdom’s army. As he tried to determine the cause, he furrowed his eyebrows.

“…I see. When you think about it, this might be an Imperial stratagem; get us worried enough for them to make their move. It’s difficult to coordinate and control so many soldiers, so even the slightest flinch in any unit could be magnified into a rout if it went on long enough. Massed troops are difficult to attack, but once they break and run, they’ll be easily hunted down and killed. That is the same principle animals use for hunting.”

A surprised Raeven followed Gazef’s line of sight to the worried-looking troops on the left flank, and then approval glowed on his face.

“That… it looks like they’re rotating the troops on the inside to the front line.”

“If only it was just a reorganization of the formation…”

“That’s Marquis Bowlrob’s flag. Looks like the left wing’s commander-in-chief is moving to the front.”

The Kingdom placed the nobles of the noble faction on both wings, while those of the royal faction were concentrated in the middle.

King Ranpossa III was the overall commander of the central column, while Marquis Bowlrob commanded the left wing.

“That’s strange, moving one’s command to the head of the formation. Do you see, Gazef-dono? The Marquis is using elite troops directly loyal to himself. His plan is to distinguish himself in combat against Imperial knights, under the eyes of the gathered nobles. That way he’ll make a reputation for himself as the lord of the strongest unit in the Kingdom.”

Raeven cast a challenging look to Gazef. *Will you let someone else gain greater glory than your beloved warrior band,* it seemed to say.

Gazef did not take the bait.

“The warrior band’s duty is to protect the King. We won’t move without the King’s direct command, even if the Empire sounds the charge. There is no greater duty for us than ensuring the safe return of the King to the capital.”

Gazef tapped the sword at his waist.

“Or perhaps, I should fend off the enemy’s attack by myself.”

“Is that… one of the four heirlooms of the Kingdom, Razor Edge… ah, I see.”

Marquis Raeven stepped back, and studied Gazef from top to bottom.

Gauntlets of Vitality, which negated fatigue. The Amulet of Immortal, which let him regenerate his wounds. Armor crafted of adamantite, the hardest metal known to man, and enchanted with magic that would deflect lethal blows. And finally, Razor Edge, a magic sword crafted with absolute sharpness in mind, which could carve enchanted metal like butter.

“Perhaps the greatest treasure of the Kingdom is yourself, fully equipped with the other treasures. I heard once that the Kingdom actually had five treasures, but it seems they had all been gathered from the start.”

Gazef blushed as he was praised as a treasure, even though he knew it was just pleasantry.

“Ah, give me a break, Marquis. The King is far greater than I am. His Majesty entrusted me, a commoner, with these items, even though he knew what that meant.”

“That’s a reasonable opinion. Frankly speaking, I felt it was a foolish move to grant the treasures to you, a commoner. All it would have done was to make more people abandon the Royal faction. However, now that we’re fighting together, I can’t help but think that it might actually be a masterstroke on the King’s part, but that’s just wishful thinking.”

“If only I could live up to your expectations…”

Gazef looked out at the serried ranks of the Imperial knights.

There was nobody he recognized as a strong adversary in the Empire, besides the Triple Magic Caster, Fluder Paradyne. Fully equipped like this, he might even be able to defeat Fluder, he thought grimly.

On the other hand, he did not feel like he had any chance at all of defeating Ainz Ooal Gown.

He could not even imagine the possibility.

No matter how hard he tried to be optimistic, to think of how he might triumph, the only thought that came to mind was of himself being instantly annihilated by the mysterious magic caster.

“What’s wrong?”

“No-nothing…”

He knew he was the greatest warrior in the Kingdom.

Allowing himself to appear weak would only lower the army’s morale.

“Ah, no… I was just thinking about poor Prince Barbro…”

“Poor Prince… could it be… I see. Is that so? Gazef-dono also feels… I see.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I mean, don’t tell me Gazef-dono feels that the King sent the prince to Carne Village so he could not distinguish himself…?”

“Is that not the case?”

Raeven smiled thinly.

“Mhm, well, I disagree. I feel that his Majesty has truly placed his trust in Gazef-dono.”

Marquis Raeven decided to explain when he saw Gazef’s completely clueless face.

“The King has acknowledged the power of Ainz Ooal Gown, the opponent that his most trusted vassal, the Warrior-Captain, is wary of. Rather than risk his beloved son in battle with an unknown quantity like that, he instead sent him to a safer place where he could accomplish something in relative safety... Although, to be honest, the old me would have been upset by the way one man his his son in a safe place while everyone else was sending their offspring to the battlefield.”

Raeven smiled in a fatherly manner.

“Of course, now I understand why he would do such a thing. I’d have done the same to ensure my son’s well-being.”

“Ah, Marquis. That’s a very fatherly thing to say.”

Raeven smiled. It was a smile that was equal parts gentle, happy and proud, a smile that Gazef felt was quite uncharacteristic of the man.

“Well, I *am* a father, after all. I promised my son that, after this battle’s over, I’m going to play with him as much as he wants, like a normal father. Ah — we’ve gone off topic. Let’s leave things at that. Although… it seems Prince Barbro doesn’t quite understand the King’s point of view. It feels a little sad how the father can’t get his feelings across to his son.”

Gazef agonized about how to answer him. It was hard for him, who had no children of his own, to put himself into that mindset.

“Right, right. By the way, is it possible that they might launch a sneak attack on E-Rantel with a separate force? Although it would be frowned upon, we can’t rule that possibility out.”

Gazef felt the topic change was incredibly forced from the moment he spoke, but to his surprise, Raeven ran with it.

“It’s not an easy matter to attack E-Rantel, defended as it is by its three layers of curtain walls. Even if the remaining two armies of the Empire mobilized in full, it would be a difficult task for them. My strategist says it’s not possible.”

“Is it? What if they had flying beasts, or a secret army of some kind?”

“Still not likely. It’s very difficult to take control of a city with a small number of men… Speaking of which, Gazef-dono. Do you know the condition required to successfully conquer E-

Rantel?”

Gazef shook his head.

“One needs to face the Kingdom in open battle and gain an overwhelming victory. If the aggressors barely manage to triumph, governing the conquered populace will be difficult, to say the least. The citizens won’t respond well to the invaders and will rise up in revolt whenever possible. So even if the Empire used a separate force to attack E-Rantel, as long as our soldiers have their strength, they would immediately fight tooth and nail to take back their city. As such, the Empire needs a total victory. With that, the citizens will be frightened into abject submission, and the soldiers won’t be able to take action.”

In other words, the Empire had to win here. In addition, they had to achieve a victory so complete and absolute, that the Kingdom would not risk trying to take back E-Rantel.

Suddenly, Gazef had the feeling that he had all the pieces of the puzzle. However, putting them together was beyond him.

A dull annoyance tormented Gazef.

“What’s wrong, Gazef-dono?

“No...”

Gazef wanted to tell Raeven about the scattered pieces of the puzzle that he’d managed to sweep together in his head. He believed that Raeven, with his superior intellect, could extract insights from them that he could not. However, at that moment, the Marquis’ eye turned back to the Imperial formation.

“Gazef-dono. It seems they’re making their move.”

The Imperial army parted in two. As Gazef was wondering if they were planning to attack the left and right wings of the Kingdom’s army, he saw an unfamiliar flag rising into the air.

It was a flag that Gazef had never seen before, adorned with a bizarre crest that belonged to neither the Kingdom or the Empire. The company raising the flag advanced.

All eyes were on that company.

And then... Gazef’s heart ran cold with terror. Raeven, who was standing beside him and saw the same thing he did, swallowed loudly. Knowing that he was not alone in his feelings, bitterness began rising at the back of his mouth, and his heart pounded madly.

A monstrous regiment.

What appeared was a group of roughly five hundred riders. It seemed entirely insignificant compared to the two armies facing each other down.

But those knights… they were highly unusual. They seemed to radiate an oppressive air that he could feel even from so far away.

It stirred up Gazef’s memories from his time in Carne Village. Ainz had said it was a knight he had created, but it was actually a monster. There were roughly two hundred of them, carrying gigantic shields and wearing spiked armor like he remembered from back then.

The rest were similarly inhuman soldiers, but they wore leather armor, and they were armed with axes, pikes, crossbows or similar weapons.

If the former were knights, then the latter could be called warriors.

But whatever they were, they were not human. They were monsters, down to the marrow of their bones.

Then, there were the creatures they rode. They were beasts made of bone, with tendrils of fog replacing their flesh and blood. The fog sparkled everywhere, pus yellow and emerald green.

Goosebumps sprouted all over his body.

This was bad.

This was very bad.

Gazef simply didn’t have the words to describe the situation more clearly than this.

“...the Empire has enlisted monsters into their ranks, it seems. This is quite surprising. It’s made me break out in goosebumps.”

“...No. No, Marquis Raeven. That’s not the case. What the

Marquis feels now... what fills your body with said goosebumps… is definitely not surprise.”

“Then what would that be?”

Gazef curtly answered Raeven, who seemed completely lost for words.

“Death. The fear of death, that swells within everything that lives.”

Turning his eyes from the visibly shaken Raeven, Gazef looked at the Imperial Army.

“The horses are shying. Even these trained, hardened warhorses can’t bring themselves to advance against that fear.”

“...What are they? A secret division of the Empire?”

“...Impossible. Those monsters are not things that humans can control, let alone use!”

Gazef knew nothing about the true identity of these monsters, but his warrior’s instinct supplied enough information for him to speak conclusively.

“They… they must be the knights of Ainz Ooal Gown!”

“Is that… the army of the magic caster you feared?!”

“Marquis Raeven! Please gather the former adventurers immediately! In order to plan our next move, we need to borrow the experience of those who’ve battled many monsters and survived!”

“Un-”

He wanted to reply that he understood, but before that, his bodyguards had already sprung into action. However, that was only expected. They knew the threat they faced better than Gazef did.

“Marquis!”

The former adventurers rode over on horseback.

“Did you see it? Do you feel it?”

At the front of the adventurers was their leader, a paladin of the Fire God, Boris Axelson.

Within his voice was a thrill of fear he could not hide.

Raeven could not speak. Gazef understood why.

Murmurs of disquiet were rising up from the adventurers, and the massed armies gathered here.

This was no longer a time for etiquette. Gazef spoke to him.

“—Tell me! What is that? No need to greet me! Please tell me everything you know, now!!”

Boris clutched the holy symbol that dangled around his neck. It was a gesture of warding.

“…We can’t be sure, but we believe the creatures they ride are legendary monsters known as Soul Eaters. They are undead creatures that hunger for the souls of the living. According to the tales, they once appeared to ravage a city of the Beastmen Kingdoms.”

“Then… how many casualties were there?”

In the silence that followed, Boris’ quiet words carried a long, long way.

“—One hundred thousand.”

The breath caught in Gazef’s throat.

“...A mere three Soul Eaters devastated the entire city they appeared in. Ninety-five percent of the people who lived there, over one hundred thousand people, were killed. It was abandoned and entered legend as the Silent City.”

A heavy silence fell on the group.

“...And there’s five hundred of them out there?”

Nobody could muster up the strength to answer Raeven.

Gazef forced himself to break the silence.

“Like I said, I find it hard to believe the Empire could subdue monsters of that level with their own power. Even that mighty magic caster, Fluder Paradyne, shouldn’t be able to do it. That means—”

He did not need to finish his sentence. Marquis Raeven understood.

“That… is that the power of Ainz Ooal Gown? Then, then… what manner of creatures are riding on those monsters’ backs?”

“That…”

The adventurers looked nervously to each other.

“That, we don’t know. We only know that they must be very dangerous. No, I apologize, I shouldn’t be using such vague terms as dangerous. However, I can think of no other words to describe what we are facing now.”

“Then, then what should we do? Gazef-dono?”

Gazef replied without wasting words.

“Retreat.”

They understood that the enemy had prepared an awe-inspiring force. With that in mind, what else could they do but run?

“Advise the king to order a retre—”

Gazef could not finish his sentence.

That was because a masked magic caster stood at the head of the enemy. At his right was a short person in a cape and robe. At his left stood one of the Empire’s Four Knights.

Even at this distance, Gazef would not mistake that man for any other...

“...Gown-dono.”

“Is that the magic caster, Ainz Ooal Gown?!”

“Is that the one who summoned the Soul Eaters? Him? Marquis Raeven, we—”

The fearless warrior of countless battles swallowed heavily, and continued in a lowered voice.

“——What on earth have we gotten ourselves into?!”

Ainz waved his arms. In response, a magic circle that was shaped like a dome and roughly ten meters in radius, sprang into existence. He was in the center. The people on his left and right were encompassed by it, but they seemed fine. He probably would not harm his own allies.

This surreal sight drew everyone’s attention, even if they knew this was an emergency.

The magic circle glowed a pale white, and translucent symbols appeared across its length and breadth. The sigils changed with kaleidoscopic speed, shifting between runes and letters that nobody had ever seen before.

The Kingdom’s troops gasped out in surprise. It was like watching a spectacular lightshow, and there was no fear or tension in their voices. However, the sharper men among them started watching their surroundings in obvious discomfort.

“I’m returning to my unit. There’s no more time to waste. Ainz Ooal Gown’s power is immeasurable. Doing battle with him was a mistake from the start. All we can do is minimize the number of casualties, and at the same time we need to get back to E-Rantel as fast as we can. Gazef-dono, please protect his Majesty. After that, retreat without delay!”

The despair clouding Raeven’s face was gone.

“Aye! Although I don’t trust my abilities that much, but I will definitely protect his Majesty’s person. Then, please fall back with all due haste—”

“I shall. We will run— no, flee like rabbits.”

“Then, I wish you well, Marquis Raeven!”

“The same, Gazef-dono!”

The men who stood at the pinnacle of the Kingdom’s military might and strategic thought hurriedly flew into action. However—

—It was too late.

◆ ◆ ◆

Nobody’s there.

After Ainz deployed his magic circle, that was what he had thought.

There were no players in the Kingdom.

YGGDRASIL’s super-tier magic was incredibly powerful.

Because of that, during a large-scale battle, bringing down a person who cast super-tier spells was the absolute highest priority.

There were many ways to interrupt the casting. Teleportation ambushes. Bombardment from atop a magic carpet. Extremely long-range sniping.

However, no attacks like these came toward Ainz. In turn, that proved that there were no YGGDRASIL players present.

Under his mask, Ainz smiled, a fact which went unseen by anyone. Of course, the skeletal Ainz could not smile.

The bitter smile, laced with faint traces of joy, highlighted the struggle in Ainz’s heart.

“So, there is no longer a need to serve as bait, then?”

His joy came from the fact that he had not met any players from YGGDRASIL.

Ainz could not be counted as the greatest among the players of YGGDRASIL. There were others who were better than he was, and the odds of his survival against stronger players than himself were not good. While playing, Ainz’s strength had stemmed from his knowledge. Although he won PVP battles with surprising regularity, that was only after forfeiting the first round of each match.

Since he was very skilled at using the information he had gathered, Ainz’s technical skills were unexpectedly high. Conversely, if he fought an opponent he had never encountered before, his chances of defeat would also be very high.

Ainz was fully aware of his abilities, and was deeply grateful that he had not encountered a powerful enemy that he knew nothing about.

But at the same time, he also felt a hint of regret.

Regret for the fact that he could not find the one who had brainwashed Shalltear among his enemies, the one who bore a World-Class item.

Hatred, thick and cloying, pooled at the bottom of Ainz's heart. Although strong emotions were suppressed by his passive skill, the weaker ones still lingered within him.

Ainz opened his hand, and within it was a miniature hourglass.

If he used a cash item, he could immediately cast the super-tier spell. The reason why he had not done this was because he wanted to lure out any possible players from YGGDRASIL. However, even if there were none, there was still no need to wait out the long casting time for the spell. He felt quite silly for having to stand still in the middle of the magic circle without being able to move.

During the battle with Shalltear, he did not have that luxury.

Against the lizardmen, he had not used an attack spell.

Then—

“Now, how is this going to turn out? I look forward to it.”

—What exactly would a super-tier attack spell do against the armies of the Kingdom?

Although it was not a particularly strong spell in YGGDRASIL, what effects would it have in this world?

Suddenly, Ainz knotted his nonexistent brows.

He was slightly afraid of himself now. He knew many people were about to die, but all he felt for them was a vague sense of pity. There wasn’t even the sense of cruelty he would feel if he trampled ants underfoot. There was nothing like that at all.

All he felt was the desire to see what his actions would bring about. And of course, the benefits he would reap for himself

— for the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

Ainz poured his strength into his hands.

The particles from the shattered hourglass flowed against the wind and into the magic circle surrounding Ainz.

With that — the super-tier spell activated.

“「Ia Shub-Niggurath!」”

A black wind blew toward the Kingdom’s army, which had just finished changing its formation.

Or rather, there was no wind. Nothing moved, from the weeds growing on the plains, or the hairs on the heads of the Kingdom’s soldiers.

There were 70'000 men in the left wing of the Kingdom’s army.

Every single one of them was killed on the spot.

Part 2

What on earth happened?

Nobody could answer that question.

Every living creature that comprised the left wing of the Kingdom’s army —horses, conscripts, knights, nobles, *everything*— suddenly keeled over and collapsed on the ground like puppets whose strings had been cut.

The ones who realized the answer first were the Imperial troops, ranged against them.

It took a while for the human mind to properly parse the events that had just transpired. So after a short delay, as a terrible understanding dawned upon them, the Imperial army was gripped by shouts of panic.

After watching Ainz Ooal Gown deploy his magic circle, they had assumed that he was casting some sort of spell. That much they could understand.

However, who could have possibly imagined it?

Who could have imagined the horrific spell that had been cast here?

The spell that was cast had slain 70'000 people —more than the entire Imperial army— in an instant, utterly and completely snuffing their lives out.

Unable to believe their eyes, the Imperial knights prayed to whatever gods they believed in.

They prayed that the people of the Kingdom were not dead.

They prayed that such terrible magic did not exist in this world.

Of course, as they took in the truth before their eyes —that not a single person had stood back up from where they fell— they were fully aware that it was nothing but a childish hope.

Even so, there was no way they could accept it. There was no way they could accept this as fact.

The man hailed as one of the strongest in the Empire, one of the Four Knights, Nimble, could only stare in mute horror and grind his teeth in naked terror at the suddenly depopulated left wing of the Kingdom’s army.

Nobody stood back up. That was a reality which was far, far too horrible to accept.

But the awful truth could not be described with just these simple words.

Ainz Ooal Gown —this magic caster, all by himself— was a monster who was capable of taking on the nations forged by men and obliterating them in the way that a child would kick down a sandcastle.

That was a reality which was beyond the ability of any words to describe.

The panic enveloping the Imperial army gradually drained away like water. In the end, everyone simply fell silent, unable to speak.

Yet, a strange noise rose up among the silence of the Imperial army’s formation. The noise was born of many sounds blending together into a clamorous racket. It was the sound of every single knight gnashing their teeth.

This was the terror born of realizing that the Empire, where they and their families lived, now stood on the edge of extinction, just like the Kingdom.

This was an understanding that if they dared to raise their hands against Ainz Ooal Gown, that same awful magic might end up being turned on themselves...

Under these circumstances, Nimble suddenly thought of something. What kind of expression did a magic caster like this —who could work a sorcery that could slaughter the living in quantities that beggared mortal comprehension— what kind of expression did he have on his face?

Without moving his face, he spied on the monster standing beside him, Ainz Ooal Gown, but all he saw was indifference.

How can this be? How can this be possible? How can someone like him… like this… be so calm? Even after taking 70'000 lives?! Granted, the battlefield is a place of death. The weak losing their lives is only a matter of course. But even so, shouldn't he feel something in his heart after killing so many people?!!

Regret or guilt would be the natural response. If he felt joy or excitement, that might even be understandable, twisted as such a reaction might be.

However —

Is this indifference some sort of defensive ability to protect his conscience? No, for a monster like this, it must be familiar scenery! Whether it's the pity humans feel for trampling ants underfoot, or some sadistic joy, none of these emotions are present!! What… what is this?!!! Why is this happening? Why does someone like this exist in the world?!!!!

"—What's the matter?"

"Aieee!"

His body felt like it was encased in cold steel. In response to the sudden question, Nimble responded with a panicked squeal.

"No-nothing's wrong. That, that spell just now, it was magnificent."

Nimble gave silent thanks that he was still able to speak. More than that — the fact that he could praise Ainz under such circumstances was nothing short of laudable.

“Ha ha ha—”

And what Nimble got in return was nothing more than quiet laughter.

“Have, have I given offense?”

“No, none at all. You said that spell just now was magnificent, right?”

“Y-yes.”

Was that what he was laughing at? The sweat flowed down Nimble’s forehead like a river. After seeing the dreadful consequences of angering this person, he had no intention of incurring his ire.

“Please, be at ease. Although I must say, my spell is not complete yet. Now is when the real show begins. After all, when one makes an offering to the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young, she will reciprocate with a gift of her offspring. Those cute, adorable children…”

That was right.

And just as ripened fruit would fall to the earth in the fullness of time —

◆ ◆ ◆

The Imperial knights were the first to see it.

It was expected that the knights, watching from a safe distance, would see it first. Because they felt safe, they dared to peer outside from the narrow slits in their helmets.

After the storm of death had claimed the lives of the Kingdom’s soldiers, something appeared in the sky, a jet-black sphere that sent chills down the spine of all who saw it. It seemed to pollute the world with its very presence.

Then, who on the Kingdom’s side saw it? It was most likely the troops of the right wing, who had no direct line of sight to what had happened on the other side. Perhaps they sensed something abnormal was going on, but they did not know the details of what had transpired, and as they looked around to find out what was going on, they saw it.

As though their eyes were being guided there, the soldiers of both sides, and the soldiers beside them noticed it. In this way, everyone on the Kattse Plains, who had gathered to wage war, ended up staring silently at the sphere floating in the sky.

The sphere —which resembled nothing so much as a hole in the heavens— was like an opened spiderweb; once one caught sight of it, one could not pull away.

The black sphere slowly grew larger.

Be it fighting or fleeing, no human could engage in any meaningful thought or activity. All they could do was stare dumbly.

And soon — the ripened fruit fell.

Like the laws of the universe, the falling sphere broke apart when it touched the earth.

It burst like a water balloon striking the ground, or perhaps like an overripe fruit doing the same.

It was full of something that spread out from the point of impact. It was something like asphalt. It absorbed the light, like a wave of hungry darkness, and it was sticky and fluid and it swallowed the corpses of the dead Kingdom soldiers.

Informed by some unknown instinct, nobody thought it would end there.

Perhaps it had only begun.

This was the beginning of their despair.

Suddenly, a vast tree grew from the black tar that covered the earth.

No, that was nothing as pleasant as a tree.

At first, there was only a single trunk, but then it multiplied. Two, three, five, ten… they waved in a wind that was not there. What was growing there... were tentacles.

“MEEEEEEHHHH!!”

Suddenly, they heard the adorable bleating of a goat. And it wasn’t just one goat. The sound of a herd of goats seemed to have come from nowhere.

As though drawn by the sound, the asphalt writhed up, and it gave birth to something.

It was something that was far too strange, too unnatural.

It was ten meters in height. If you added the length of the tentacles, that figure became unclear.

At a glance, it resembled some sort of turnip. In place of leaves, it had numberless black tentacles, and its body was a slab of meat covered in raised lumps. Below that were five legs, like those of a goat’s, tipped with black hooves.

Fissures appeared on its body —that thick slab of meat covered in lumps— peeling and splitting with the sound of something shattering. These cracks were not limited to just one area. And then...

“MEEEEEEHHHH!!”

The adorable bleating of goats rang forth from those openings. They were savage maws that drooled without end.

There were five of them.

They revealed their spine-chilling forms to everyone on the Kattse Plains.

The Dark Young of the Black Goat.

Born of the super-tier spell “Ia Shub-Niggurath - Sacrifice to the Black Harvest”, they were monsters summoned from the deaths of men. Although they did not possess any powerful special abilities, they were outstandingly resilient.

And their level was over 90.

This was a portent of a storm of carnage.

Besides the adorable bleating, so sickeningly sweet and cute that it made people want to vomit, there were no other sounds. That was because nobody could speak, unwilling to believe or accept that the events unfolding in front of their eyes were truly happening. Over 300'000 —or if you counted only the living, 235'000— people were gathered here, and none of them could say anything.

Under these circumstances, Ainz laughed heartily.

“Marvelous. This is a new record. In all of history, I might be the only one who ever managed to call forth five at once. Remarkable. I must give my thanks to everyone who died here today.”

Under normal circumstances, every summoning of the Dark Young would only produce one entity, which was itself a cause for celebration. Being able to bring out two was a rarity.

And now, there were five.

Just like a player who was celebrating over beating his own high score, Ainz was overjoyed by the fact that he had set this new record. So what if tens of thousands had died for it?

“Although… it would be better if there were more… is five the upper limit? If I’ve already reached the spell cap, then this would be quite a feat.”

“Congratulations! As expected of Ainz-sama!”

Ainz smiled under his mask as Mare praised him.

“Thank you, Mare.”

After that, Nimble turned as if by reflex, his face somewhere between tears and laughter as he praised Ainz as well.

“Con-congratulations.”

“You’re welcome.”

Ainz replied in good humor.

Nimble’s appearance of being honestly moved fueled the itch in Ainz’s heart.

Then, he remembered his days as a YGGDRASIL player, of the same swell of emotion he had when he had first seen the casting of ‘Ia Shub-Niggurath!”

As a flashy, super-tier spell, it seems to have stolen the hearts of everyone. Well, that was only to be expected of one of the most popular spells in YGGDRASIL. When I said I was going to cast it, Albedo and Demiurge couldn't stop lavishing praise on me.

A *gachigachi* sound rose from the ranks of the Imperial army.

It was the sound of armor clattering against itself.

The soldiers' bodies were trembling in fear, but nobody could laugh at them.

There was nobody who wasn't covered in goosebumps after hearing the laughter of the Sorcerer King who had cast that bone-chilling spell.

Every man in the Imperial knights made the same wish.

They wished that the wrath of Ainz Ooal Gown would not fall upon them.

In that sense, it was more like a prayer.

While the soldiers fervently implored their gods for aid, Ainz began the next phase. He felt that he had already done enough, but then again, it did not hurt to make sure.

This time round, the objective was to proclaim the might of Ainz Ooal Gown, a practitioner of super-tier magic, to the gathered nations.

That objective had been achieved. However, letting these minions fade away would be a waste.

That’s right, it would be far too wasteful.

Ainz snorted.

If he had a tongue, he would be licking his lips in anticipation.

This was a joy he could not feel in YGGDRASIL, the joy of being able to simultaneously direct five Dark Young.

“—Ah, let’s give it a try. Overrun them, my darling lambs.”

As they received the command of their summoner Ainz, the Young began to move with ponderous slowness.

With a baffling, five-legged gait, they launched into nimble motion. Rather than being graceful, however, it was more of a frantic tangle of movement and energy, and from a certain point of view, it might even be seen as laughable.

As long as they did not come for you.

Their vast bodies moved lightly, and the five Dark Young began sprinting as they charged into the Kingdom’s army.

『Ah, right, there’s three — no, four people you can’t kill. I absolutely forbid you to harm them. 』

As he recalled the three people that Demiurge wished to be spared, Ainz sent out a mental command to the Dark Young.

♦ ♦ ♦

“Is this a dream?”

The Kingdom’s soldiers muttered to each other, some distance from the inhuman demons. Of course, nobody could answer them. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on the scene unfolding before them, and they had lost the power of speech. It was as if their souls had been snatched away.

“Hey, this is a dream, right? I must be dreaming, right?”

“Ahh. This is a fucking nightmare.”

The second time the question was asked, some people managed to answer. But their responses carried a hint of wanting to run away from reality.

It was impossible.

They didn’t want to believe it.

Thoughts like these spread through the infantry. Even as the lumbering shapes grew steadily larger, even as the inhuman beings approached them, they still did not want to accept that this was reality.

If they were simple monsters, perhaps they might have gathered the courage to raise their weapons. However, the things that had appeared after an army of 70'000 had been slaughtered in an instant could not possibly be simple monsters. It was like watching an advancing hurricane, and nobody could muster up the courage to brave the storm.

The gigantic, yet unnaturally swift beings galloped on their thick stubby legs, charging at incredible speeds.

“Get your spears up!”

A voice rang out.

It came from the mouth of a noble, a shrill, high-pitched scream that was a falsetto born of desperation. His eyes were bloodshot and foam flecked the corners of his mouth.

“Spears up! Get your spears up!! *Get your spears up if you want to live!!!*”

Although he had already lost his mind from fear and it was hard to understand what he was saying, he was still able to clearly utter the command “Spears up”. In retrospect, that was probably the best command he could have given.

Acting on reflex, the soldiers raised and set their spears, forming a braced spear line.

They planted the butts firmly on the ground, so their opponents’ speed would only harm themselves when they charged into the hedge of points.

Although this formation was nigh-unbreakable by Imperial knights, the Kingdom soldiers wondered —in some small, detached corner of their minds which still held onto lucidity— what good they could possibly do with the tiny spears they were grasping. Perhaps they thought this was their only chance of salvation.

It was impossible to flee from under the hooves of the creatures that approached with unnatural speed. Even if they ran with all their strength, they would still be trampled into red mush.

Wishing as one that the monsters would not come for them, the soldiers braced their spears and awaited the charge.

The monsters —which should have been very small in the distance— closed the gap with unbelievable speed.

As they grew larger, and the earth began shaking under their thunderous hoofbeats, the soldiers’ hearts began pounding madly.

Then, as their hearts felt like they would burst in their chests, the enormous silhouettes appeared before their eyes.

It was like a dumptruck smashing into a swarm of rats.

The soldiers of the Kingdom’s army raised their spears with trembling hands. But what use were they against the massive, solid bodies of the Dark Young? The spears snapped like toothpicks without so much as scratching their monstrous hides.

The Dark Young trampled the bodies of the Kingdom’s soldiers underfoot.

Countless splinters from a multitude of shattered spears flew through the air.

Although they crushed the resistance that did not even count as resistance, the Dark Young of the Black Goat were merciful in their own way.

There was no pain.

There was no time for their victims to suffer before they were squashed flat under the titanic weight of the Dark Young.

The spear-wielding soldiers didn’t even have time to realize that the pikes they were holding had been pulverized into splinters. All they saw were black shadows appearing before them.

They screamed and they screamed and they screamed.

Gobbets of meat flew through the air. They had not come from just one or two people, but tens, hundreds of victims. They were trampled by the enormous hooves, and thrown—no, flung away by the waving tentacles.

Be they patricians or plebeians, now they were all the same chunks of bloody flesh.

Some of them had family in their villages. Some had friends left behind. Some had people waiting for them. Once their unrecognizable corpses were ground into the mud, none of that mattered any more.

To everyone, the Dark Young gave the same, equal treatment — death.

They crushed countless humans underfoot with their hooves until they were satisfied by the bloodshed, but even then they had no intention of stopping.

The Dark Young of the Black Goat began to run.

They ran on. They would not stop while in the middle of the Kingdom’s forces.

“Iyaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Abbaaaaaaahhhhh!!”

“Stoooooooooooooop!”

“Save meeeeeeeeeee!’

“Noooooooooooooooo!”

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!”

The screams rose up every time the hooves came down. It mixed with the wet pulping sound of the bodies mangled under the mighty hooves of the Dark Young, and their thick, meaty tentacles flailed around in a wild, playful manner that sent human bodies flying with sickening *crack*s.

A sound never heard before went on and on without end.

Trampled.

What better word was there to describe this scene?

Several people desperately thrust their pikes forward. The Dark Young, whose bodies were massive and who had no intention to evade the attacks, were hit solidly by the points. However, the pikes could not pierce deeply enough to cause harm to their slab-like bodies. It was as though iron-hard muscles had been sheathed by thick, rubbery skin.

Without mocking their futile resistance, the Dark Young advanced single-mindedly.

Before the soldiers realized that their fatal resolve was meaningless, the Dark Young had already reached the centermost portion of the Kingdom’s army.

“Run away! Run away!”

They heard the shouts from the distance. In response, all the soldiers began to flee. It was exactly like a swarm of spiders scattering in all directions.

But of course, the Dark Young were much faster than human beings.

Splat. Splat.

Splat. Splat.

The sounds of humans being trampled into a pulp, the sound of meat chunks flying through the air, and the sound of the screaming continued on and on.

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As though they had arrived in a barren wasteland, three of the monsters crossed the center column of the army and ran toward the right wing amidst sprays of blood and gore. In moments, they would be upon Raeven’s troops.

“Retreat! Retreat!”

The way Raeven shouted these orders was closer to a wail.

One could not fight them.

One should not throw one’s life away for no reason.

As they heard Raeven’s words, the surrounding soldiers threw down their arms and fled in a panic.

Of course, since there were just too many people, it was impossible for them to move freely.

At first he had thought of signalling an orderly retreat. They would be on guard against attack from behind and so on, but wasting time on that sort of thing now would be a huge mistake.

“Ainz Ooal Gown, what kind of being, what kind of magic caster are you?!”

He had underestimated him. No, he hadn’t intended to do that at first.

After taking Gazef Stronoff’s words into consideration, he had planned to view him as an enemy of the highest caliber imaginable. However, all he could say now was that he had grossly underestimated the man’s abilities.

His imagination simply hadn’t been enough.

Who on earth could have predicted that Ainz Ooal Gown would possess such awesome might? Who could have known such powers existed in this world?

Seeing the ever-approaching, ever-expanding silhouettes of the monsters, the troops surrounding Marquis Raeven shouted orders.

“This isn’t a battlefield any more, it’s a killing floor! Just run!”

“My lord!” a knight said as he removed his helmet. “The King! What about the King?”

“You idiot! There’s no time for that! My lord! It’s coming right for us!”

As they looked in the direction of the shouts, while the more enterprising had already fled, the crushing of the broken right wing had already begun. Although it seemed as though they were charging toward them in a straight line, they were not aiming for Raeven so much as trampling wherever they wanted. In truth, the other Dark Young were far away from where Raeven was.

“Where’s the king?!”

“He’s there!”

As he looked in the direction of the royal flag that the soldier was pointing out, a Dark Young was already closing in on it.

Raeven wavered. What could he do if he went to help? However, if King Ranpossa III was lost here, the entire country might come apart.

However—

“Leave it to Gazef-dono!”

Raeven had faith in Gazef.

He was a warrior worthy of praise from the King. Although even he would still be unable to defeat those black goat monsters, at the very least, he could bring the king safely out of this hellscape.

“Marquis Raeven! The situation is bad! Please retreat with all haste!”

The voice of the former-orichalcum adventurers, the subordinates he most trusted, interrupted Raeven’s waffling.

“—My lord!”

It was less of a shout than a scream. Raeven bellowed a reply.

“Understood! I’m going now!”

Already — at this point, at this distance, there was no point disguising a retreat in fancy words.

“Please leave the task of rallying the men to me! My lord, you need to get out of here now, and head for E-Rantel!”

The shout came from a sleepy-eyed man. Although he looked very unreliable, Raeven could not have entrusted his command to a better person.

“I’ll leave it to you! Use my name as you see fit! I’ll bear the consequences!”

The sound of hooves was very near. Out of fear, he did not dare turn around to see how close they were. Raeven stuck his spurs into his horse’s flanks with all his might. However, the horse did not move. Even when he kicked it with strength, it still did not move. It flattened its ears against its head and stayed still.

At that moment, amidst the chaos, a group of horses that had thrown their riders ran through. The men on their backs clung tightly to their horses’ bodies, seemingly ignoring the reins that dangled loosely.

How ironic, to think that trained warhorses would be unable to move out of fear, while untrained horses would run wild out of panic.

“To think training would have the reverse effect!”

In the first place, horses were timid animals. It was only after training that they could be considered fearless warhorses. However, it was precisely because of this training that they could not move. The fact that they did not break and run under the effects of this fear was proof that the training was effective.

“Forgive me! 「Lion’s Heart」!”

The priest of the Wind God, Yorlan Dixgort, cast a spell of fear resistance on the horse. The calmed horse whinnied loudly.

“My lord! We’ll lead the way!”

“Please do!”

With the voices of his subordinates wishing him well echoing at his back, Raeven spurred his horse into wild motion, escorted by the former-orichalcum adventurers.

Riding a horse through a chaotic, violent mob was very difficult. As such, it was only possible because of the former-orichalcum adventurers, who stood close to the pinnacle of humanity.

Turning his back to the voices that hoped for his well-being, Raeven managed to penetrate the flow of people under the guard of the adventurers.

“That magic caster’s a monster! How can someone like him be allowed to exist in the world?!”

Raeven cursed Ainz as his horse jerked up and down in its top-speed gallop.

“Dammit! We have to do something! I need to think of some way to protect our world — our future!”

Fear was probably the reason why he was subconsciously mumbling to himself. If he didn’t say anything, if he didn’t distract his consciousness, that intelligent brain of his would probably sketch horrific nightmares of the danger approaching him.

When he returned, he would need to sit down with the Prince and the Princess and draw up some form of countermeasure against that magic caster who defied the expectations placed on his kind.

If this goes on, all of humanity will be conquered... No, that’s the best case scenario. In the worst case, all of humanity will become toys for Ainz Ooal Gown, to be tormented until the ends of their wretched lives.

The sound of his tongue clicking, filled with tension and frustration, overrode the sound of the horse’s gallop.

“Not good! My lord, please guide your horse to the right! It’s caught up with us!”

“How did it find us without eyes?!” Lockmeyer the thief shouted. “Lund! Do you have any magic for this?”

“Of course not! Do you think any spells would work against that monster, Lock?”

“Even so, how will we know if we don’t try—”

“Enough! We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it! It might just be advancing in the same direction as us! My lord! Move in front of us! We’ll form up single file!”

Their voices were wavering.

In accordance with the instructions, Raeven ran his horse to the pole position. Then, he turned his horse toward the direction where less people were fleeing.

From the distance, the bleating of a Dark Young drowned out the beating of his heart.

“MEEEEEEEEEEHHHH!”

—It was close.

The sweat poured off Raeven’s head like a waterfall. He didn’t dare to turn around out of fear, but he could sense the air behind him getting warmer and warmer.

Then, another—

“MEEEEEEEHHHH!!”

“Dammit! No good! It was coming this way all along! ...Everyone! Prepare yourselves!”

In response, the team leader Boris cried out and cast his spell.

“ 「Reinforce Armor」!”

“「Lesser Strength」!”

“Good! Then, my lord! Let us receive the enemy’s attack! Do not look back under any circumstances and continue riding!”

There was only one thing he could say to the adventurers, who had conquered their fear.

“...I’m counting on you!”

“Understood! Let’s go!”

“Ohhhhh!”

He could hear the distance widening between himself former adventurers behind him.

Raeven lowered his head, doing his best to minimize wind resistance. Although he didn’t know how much time they could buy, all he could do was escape as hard as he could — returning alive would be the only way to repay their loyalty.

“Fly! 「Fireball」!”

“「Invulnerable Fortress」!”

As he rode away on the back of the wildly-galloping horse, Raeven thought he could hear the sound of the former adventurers joining battle, and even through the wind whipping past his face and ears.

And then — within two seconds he could not hear the former adventurers any more.

What he did hear was the sound of an enormous hoof falling.

His heart lurched in his chest.

In his field of view from his lowered head, the gigantic shadow he saw below him made Raeven wail in soundless despair.

He recognized that under his feet — his body carried by the horse running at top speed - a thick and long tentacle was reaching out toward him.

“No…”

The horse ran like it had gone mad. It was faster than Raeven had ever ridden it. It might have been the fastest it had ever gone.

Even so, the mighty shadow still stretched out across the earth.

“I don’t want this!”

He screamed. Against his will, he screamed with all his heart.

A warm, wet sensation spread through his crotch.

Raeven forced his eyes open, and without looking back, he forced the horse forward.

He couldn’t die. The country didn’t matter. If it was going to fall, then let it fall.

If taking up arms against Ainz Ooal Gown meant death, then abandoning the country and fleeing was fine too.

An idiot.

What an idiot he had been.

Coming to this battlefield was truly foolish.

Had he known how powerful Ainz Ooal Gown was, he would have stayed in the capital no matter the cost.

He would not think of the Kingdom’s future any more.

“I don’t want this!”

He still couldn’t die.

He couldn’t die while his son was still so young. And... he couldn’t leave his beloved wife alone by dying.

“I don—”

Raeven imagined the form of his son before him.

My lovely boy.

A tiny little life had been born. It slowly grew up. It got sick. Back then, he had made a huge fuss because of that. The image of himself running around half-mad, bellowing orders, while his wife sat there in silence, embarrassed him.

Those soft and delicate hands and those rosy cheeks. When he grew up, he would be the talk of the Kingdom. He believed his son’s abilities would surpass his own. He could already see that potential emerging from time to time.

He was not spoiling him, like his wife kept saying he did.

Raeven was deeply grateful to the wife that had raised his beloved son. However, he rarely said so because it embarrassed him.

It was time for a second child.

If he hadn’t come to this battlefield, he might be able to embrace the two of them.

“…Eh?”

The sound of the hooves had suddenly stopped.

Driven more by curiosity than courage, Raeven turned around. In his eyes, he saw the Dark Young motionless, as though frozen in place.

Part 3

He had no idea where he was. It was like he had been drawn into a nightmare.

The title of the Four Knights —the title belonging to the mightiest warriors of the Baharuth Empire— now seemed so shockingly superficial.

How could such an impotent creature like himself have been proud of that title? That was how great a shock he had received.

The weeping which could not be contained reached Nimble’s ears. It was the sobbing of people who had been pushed past their limits by fear and despair. It was a childish — no, it was the agonized wailing of men who had been reduced to children. The ones who wept were the Imperial knights.

He heard pleas of “Let’s run away.”

That was the prayer of the knights who had —with eyes full of pity— watched the miserable slaughter of their fellow humans by those engines of carnage.

So wretched was this tragedy that even the Kingdom’s enemies, the Imperial knights, offered up prayers for them.

They prayed that at least some would survive. The more, the better.

They had come here to kill the enemy. However, nobody could remain unmoved and not feel pity in the face of the massacre taking place in front of them. Anyone who could remain unmoved would be a fiend with a man’s face, a being that could not be considered human.

Nimble and the knights realised that this could not be dismissed as a matter of “us vs them.”

Certainly, from the point of view of the Kingdom and the Empire, this disaster was happening to “them.” But when you looked at it from the perspective of humans and monsters, this brutal slaughter was happening to “us.”

“Well then, I think it’s time.”

Everybody’s eyes turned to Ainz as he spoke quietly.

With 60'000 people present, not everyone could hear his voice. However, they could tell when the people beside them turned their heads. And knowing that the faces of their neighbors were turned to Ainz Ooal Gown, they too would be drawn in by that action.

After all, every move and gesture made by the man who had orchestrated this nightmare —Ainz Ooal Gown— filled all present with uncontrollable terror.

Ainz slowly removed his mask.

He exposed his skinless, fleshless, polished white skull to the world.

If the circumstances had been different, perhaps they might have thought he was wearing a mask under his mask. However, as they saw this, the hearts of Nimble and all the knights of the Empire sank.

This was because they had clearly glimpsed the true face of Ainz Ooal Gown, the monster.

Anyone who could wield such power could not be human. It was because of this mindset that they were able to accept this as reality.

Ainz slowly spread his arms. He looked like he was embracing a friend — or was it a demon spreading its wings? In the eyes of all who were watching, he seemed to double, triple in size, perhaps more.

In the silence — interrupted only by the anguished screams of the Kingdom’s soldiers in the distance — Ainz’s still, small voice rang out with exceptional clarity.

“— A cheer, then.”

What was he saying, Nimble thought as he stared at Ainz with his mouth open.

Everyone who could hear him thought the same thing, and as Ainz’s words who repeated throughout the army in low tones, more and more people turned their eyes to him.

Then, when everyone’s attention was on him, he spoke again.

“A cheer in celebration of my supreme power.”

The first to move was Mare, who stood opposite Nimble, by Ainz’s side. As though sparked by it, the sounds of clapping began rising up from the soldiers, until it become a thunderous ovation.

Of course, they were not truly cheering for him.

Nobody wanted to applaud a person who brought this kind of cruel butchery with him. This was not war. It was slaughter. A massacre.

Only, nobody present could speak these words. Nobody dared.

Their earth-shaking applause was the embodiment of the knights’ fears.

And then the intensity of the riotous applause, which all present thought could not get any greater, rose several more notches.

That was because one of the Dark Young had changed its direction of advance. Its new course would take it toward the

Imperial army.

In response to that, cries of joy rang out.

That was the shouted praise of the Imperial knights for Ainz Ooal Gown. They were desperate cries that made their throats bleed.

Yet, the Dark Young did not slow its pace.

And so, the knights cried out even louder. They thought the beast was approaching because their volume was not sufficient.

But still, it did not stop.

And thus, their tightly wound nerves snapped.

Nobody knew who started it. It might have just been the wavering of a single knight. The terror which filled them all to their limit would burst out easily, after all.

“Aieeeeeeeeeeee!”

The soul-wrenching scream echoed throughout the ranks and shook the Imperial army.

The knights abandoned their horses, which could not move, to flee on foot. This senseless move was born of their fear of one of those monsters —the same monsters which had trampled the Royal Army underfoot— drawing near. They had seen too much of those hellish sights. Even those who lacked vivid imaginations knew exactly what would happen when it was their turn under that beast’s hooves.

And of course — fear was contagious.

While less than a hundred people fled at first, it soon swelled into an exodus of sixty thousand.

Yes.

The imperial army had fallen into a rout, their vaunted military discipline in tatters.

It was a disgraceful retreat.

The knights had obviously been taught how to fall back in good order. However, there was no longer time to obey such superfluous rules. If it would let them leave this place one second faster, if they could move one step more in flight toward a safe place, they would push their comrades down with all their strength and run.

When shoved from behind, it was unavoidable that people would lose their balance and fall. And once they fell, the panic-driven throng behind them would not give them the chance to rise.

The ones who fell would be trampled by the ones behind them.

Although they all wore metal armor, everyone else wore metal armor as well. It would not take long to crush steel and flesh into a single, gore-caked lump.

Scenes like this were happening everywhere.

The Imperial army’s casualties were not caused by the enemy, but by themselves.

Not knowing what to do, Nimble hesitated uneasily.

He wanted to run as well. However, he was not allowed to, and not all the knights had escaped anyway.

As he looked back toward the Imperial army, he saw a scant few of them, remaining stock still atop their horses.

The reason they had not escaped was not because of fear. Rather, it was because they were mesmerized, in the same way that humanity was fascinated by overwhelming power they could not do anything against.

For instance, normal people would flee when they saw a huge tornado sweeping in toward them. However, there were certain beings who admired the beauty of the tornado and stood still even though they realized it would claim their lives. Those that remained could be considered deviants.

The Dark Young arrived before Ainz, bent its knees, and lowered its tentacles. It was probably displaying its submission to its master.

Nimble smiled, his face twitching, as the monster acted in a manner more fitting of a puppy.

The Dark Young’s front was bathed in fresh blood, and what could not be seen had already been absorbed by its skin.

It wrapped its tentacles around Ainz’s waist, then extended several more to firmly grip his body before raising him up. Then, it placed him on its head.

“I believe the original plan was that I would cast a spell to make a breach, and then the Imperial army would charge in behind, but there doesn’t seem to be any movement from the Imperial Army.

Nimble had nothing to say.

Just like that. The Empire had broken the terms of the agreement which they themselves had made with the King of their allied country.

However, one could not blame the knights for losing their nerve. Nimble would probably defend them even in front of Jircniv, because he knew the extent of the terror which gripped them.

“Ah, I have no intention of rebuking you. I am aware that if you decide to launch an assault, there is a chance you may be trampled along with the enemy. Truthfully speaking, if that happened, I would be hard-pressed to explain those deaths to your Emperor. Well, in that case, I guess I will handle your part of the job as well.”

Nimble looked to the company of the undead, which had remained still.

“Will... will... will the undead troops make an assault, then?”

“Oh, no, these dear little lambs have done most of that already, I simply intend to clean up. Mare, do not lower your guard.”

“Yes, yes! Please leave it to me, Ainz-sama!”

Nimble could not speak.

He still wanted to continue the assault, even after all of this. The one who had cast the spell himself.

Does he intend to personally exterminate everyone on the battlefield?! Does his appetite for slaughter know no limit?!!

“To think… it’s not enough. Is he a devil?”

Although he was muttering to himself, Nimble’s words were louder than he thought, and Ainz turned his terrible visage on him from where he was seated atop the Dark Young.

He shook his head at the quivering Nimble.

“Do not be mistaken. I am undead.”

What Ainz must have been trying to say was that he was not a demon that exalted the idea of evil, but an undead that hated life. As such, he would not permit a single soldier of the Kingdom to escape. Part of that was taking even more lives than had already been lost.

This answer was both the most likely, and the most disastrous.

Being that he was undead himself, if Ainz wanted to slay everything that lived, then it was possible that his sights might someday be set on the Empire, which was filled with the living.

No, that horrific future was inevitable.

As he was wondering what he should do, assaulted by chaos and fear and lacking any ability to focus himself, Nimble heard the final words Ainz spoke.

“...And it seems I have found my target.”

◆ ◆ ◆

The base camp of King Ranpossa III was located in the center of the Royal army. It was surrounded by banners belonging to numerous nobles of the Kingdom of Re-Estize.

Although there had been many nobles gathered here before, now only a few remained. Most of them had already fled, and the number of people who remained in this camp could be counted on two hands. But of course, nobody would be angry at the nobles for fleeing.

“Leave me behind and run!”

“Your Majesty, this is no time for jokes! Please flee with all haste. Once it catches up with us, we have no chance to survive!”

Gazef’s subordinate, the vice-captain of the warrior band, was speaking.

“How can I, as the King, run away?”

“Even if your Majesty stays, there is nothing you can do. Should you not return to E-Rantel and plan the counter-attack?”

Ranpossa III smiled bitterly. It hurt to listen to those words.

“That’s right. Even if I stay here, there is nothing left for me to do.”

It was impossible to rally his shattered army under these circumstances. This was not a slight on Ranpossa III; no other commander would have been able to do it either.

“Your Majesty! There’s no time! Listen up, even if you have to drag him back in chains, you must bring his Majesty home!”

With that, Gazef’s subordinates leapt into action.

Wasting more time would endanger not only himself but the people around him. With that in mind, Ranpossa III made his decision and rose to his feet.

“Alright. Let’s go. But what will change if we flee now?”

The footfalls shook the ground like an earthquake as they drew closer. But even under these dangerous circumstances, Ranpossa III remained calm. It was far cry from the chaotic noises the nobles had made.

“To begin with, we can’t ride. If we try to flee on horseback, they’ll catch up with us. They seem to target large groups of fleeing soldiers first. As such, there is no other way for us to be saved.”

It was only now that Ranpossa III realised that these men from the nobles’ mounted troops had come here for precisely this reason.

“So all we can do is run on foot.”

Some of the warrior band began removing and discarding their armor.

"These men will carry your Majesty while fleeing."

"And what of the rest?"

Not everyone had removed their armor. The vice-captain and his comrades were still wearing it.

"We will act as a mounted distraction and flee in the opposite direction."

Ranpossa III understood their determination from the clear smiles on the warriors' faces.

"Impossible. You are the treasures of our Kingdom! No matter what, you must survive! I still need you to serve my children!"

"Of course. Although we intend to be bait, we do not intend to die!"

That was a lie. They were planning to die. Or rather, they had accepted that death was their destiny.

Ranpossa III tried to think of something convincing to say, but no words came. In the face of the warriors’ smiles, anything he thought of seemed to wither and blow away.

The warriors helped remove Ranpossa III’s armor.

A warrior in pure white armor stepped forward. He was Climb, his daughter Renner’s loyal subordinate, and the only one who had stayed here until now.

“Allow me to assist in the diversion. Although we don’t know if these monsters have eyes, but if we wave our flags non-stop, we should be able to draw their attention. And this armor should be quite eye-catching.”

Climb held the Kingdom’s flag in his hand. it had been dirtied by the footprints of fleeing soldiers, and seemed like a hint as to how to deal with the current situation.

“Aye. Then I will go too.”

At the side was Brain Unglaus. Apparently he was a first-rate warrior who was the equal of his trusted vassal, Gazef Stronoff. Brain had entered this war as Renner’s subordinate. In other words, they were in similar positions.

"Are you sure? The two of you are not exactly the Princess' subordinates."

"Ah? Well, don't worry about that. During the demonic disturbance we were on the frontlines, and somehow we still made it back alive. This time, we'll just hope that luck is with us. And we hope that luck is with you too."

"The gods will not watch in silence. During that disturbance, a hero came to save us. I trust they will change our fate too."

In front of Ranpossa III, Brain joined his knuckles in salute, to bid the vice-captain farewell.

"How did it end up like this…"

Where had it all gone wrong?

Ranpossa III moaned softly. He knew that none of the men in front of him would survive.

The vice-captain and Climb would die as bait.

And Gazef, who had vanished into the chaos after saying he intended to stop the Dark Young, who knew what had happened to him?

His eyes were hot.

Spare me, he wanted to say.

They were going to throw their young lives away, for him, an old man.

But he couldn’t say that. They were fighting desperately while aware of their imminent deaths.

Then-

“Return safely to E-Rantel, and I shall grant you any reward you desire.”

Climb and Brain paused mid-step and turned around.

“There’s no need for a reward, your Majesty. I exist to aid Renner-sama. That is reward enough.”

“As for me, well, how about marrying the most beautiful princess in the country to this kid here?”

“…Hahahaha. Well, that is a lavish reward.”

“Brain-san! What are you saying?”

“Well, we’ll have to start by giving the kid a lordship. Work hard!”

“Then you must return alive, Climb-kun.”

Climb’s empty eyes and open mouth no longer had the warrior’s spirit they had possessed just now. The King, however, had inadvertently allowed a bright smile onto his face.

“Then, we’ll be off, your Majesty.”

“I’ll leave it to you.”

The now-unarmored Ranpossa III was borne aloft by a soldier.

“Your Majesty. Even now, our flight is still a matter of luck. If the worst happens… I pray you will forgive me.”

“Very well. It was my decision to use your idea. If it fails due to misfortune, then I will have no complaints.”

“Then! Your Majesty! May we meet again in E-Rantel!”

The vice-captain galloped off on his horse. As though it were waiting for them, one of the Dark Young changed its direction.

“Alright! Let’s go while they’re drawing it off!”

Part 4

Amidst the chaotic surge of routed men fleeing in random directions, Gazef fixed his eyes to his front, and slowly drew the weapon that was the treasure of the Kingdom, Razor Edge. As long as he held the shining blade in his hands, Gazef’s victory was assured. In other words, this sword was the proof of his triumph.

However, today it seemed far too weak and small.

It seemed puny and pathetic in comparison to the gargantuan body of the Dark Young which had charged straight in.

“If this place falls, the King’s main camp is next. I need to stop it here.”

As he said that, Gazef smiled, as though he were mocking himself.

There was no way for Gazef to beat that monster. Even being able to delay it for a second was worthy of praise.

Even a man hailed as the Warrior-Captain of the Kingdom, —a warrior renowned throughout the nations— could only do so much.

“Take his Majesty and flee. Pave his way home with your lives.”

These orders were whispered —almost like a prayer— to his subordinates who were not here. The strongest soldiers in the Kingdom had stayed behind to protect their King. However, even if they stayed behind, they would not be strong enough to as a shield for the King in the face of those monsters. Even putting their lives on the line would only allow them to take a single hit from their enemies before crumbling.

However, that was enough.

They would die if the enemy hit them, but as long as they could make sure that hit was wasted on them, the King’s life could be extended just a little more. *Maybe it would work if 80 men were there to be shields,* he thought optimistically.

“I’m sorry.”

Gazef apologized to his subordinates as the monster approached with uncanny speed, churning up sprays of flesh and gore in its wake. He knew that an apology to absent comrades was nothing more than satisfying his own ego. Even so, he did not want to die without having spoken those words.

As he felt the earth trembling under his feet, Gazef exhaled forcefully.

He gripped the sword in his hands tightly, and raised it.

His sword seemed so useless in front of that vast body that crushed humans into red paste.

If it were a runaway horse cart, he could easily get control of it. If a ferocious tiger pounced him, he could evade its first blow and strike off its head.

Yet, in front of the Dark Young, his chances of survival seemed very low indeed.

“Huuuuu—”

As Gazef breathed out, a dramatic change appeared in the flow of people around him. Until now they had gone in all directions, but now it seemed like they were moving to avoid Gazef. It looked as though they were creating a clear path between Gazef and the Dark Young.

The Dark Young drew ever closer, splattering humans under its hooves with every step it took.

As Gazef raised his sword, he studied its body. Where could he attack for the best results?

He activated a martial art — ‘Sense Weakness’.

However—

“—It has no weaknesses.”

Whether it truly had no weaknesses, or any which appeared could not be seen because of the overwhelming difference in strength, Gazef did not know.

Still, he did not despair. He had expected an outcome like this, after all.

He activated another martial art.

This was a secret move that was truly worthy of being called a secret move, a technique that would strengthen his extrasensory perceptions, ‘Possibility Sense’.

With the astronomical difference in their physical abilities, it made no difference if he shrunk a gap of miles by an inch or two through augmenting his own physical attributes. In that case, he decided to rely on something else — if it was his sixth sense, it might be more effective.

“Come, beast.”

The Dark Young seemed to have heard the challenge, and set a course straight for Gazef. The distance between the two shrank dramatically.

To tell the truth—

—Gazef was afraid.

If he could, he really wanted to flee with the surrounding soldiers.

Even after activating ‘Possibility Sense’ he couldn’t feel anything. It was like he was enveloped by an impenetrable wall of night.

As the Dark Young closed in, he studied its form in greater detail.

Judging by the way its hooves remained undamaged, it was likely that normal swords would not be able to deal any harm to it. From the deep prints it left in the ground where it stepped, its weight would instantly kill anyone it was applied to.

As his understanding of the beast deepened, so did his fear of it grow.

Right now, Gazef was exposed to a terror far more intense than those of the soldiers fleeing willy-nilly around him.

But he could not turn back.

The Kingdom’s strongest warrior could not flee. He cancelled

‘Possibility Sense’, and calmed his breathing.

The Dark Young pressed closer.

It was close enough that the clods of dirt kicked up by its hooves could reach Gazef.

It ignored the soldiers around it, like they were nothing but crawling worms, and headed straight for Gazef.

Or not.

The Dark Young turned like it had hit a wall, rushing past Gazef. Because it had turned so quickly, the Dark Young’s footsteps were messed up, and if it did not have so many legs it would have lost its balance.

The enemy had run away. This was impossible and even Gazef knew it.

It had simply considered where it could find more prey and changed its direction toward a place where it could trample more victims underneath its gore-caked hooves.

The Dark Young charged past Gazef, making the world quake in its passing.

Because there had been a meter or so of separation, the ground under his feet shook like an earthquake. Anyone but Gazef would have fallen down.

He aimed at the Dark Young’s gigantic hoof as it ran past—

“—Haah!”

Gazef swung his sword. At those velocities, the enemy’s own speed would become a weapon that would tear itself apart on the edge of his blade.

In the instant the hoof touched the sword, a massive impact travelled up the weapon and into Gazef’s arms. It made him feel as though his arms were dislocated.

His feet, planted firmly in the ground, left two trenches in the dirt as he was dragged backward.

“Gwaaargh!”

Somehow, he had kept his grip on his sword, but pain spread through his entire body. Be it his muscles or his tendons, every part of him hurt from the stress it had to bear.

Gazef breathed hard, and stared at the giant body that passed him.

Not far from Gazef, one of the Dark Young had finally stood still as opposed to running madly.

One of its tentacles had become a blur.

A chill not born of the temperature filled his entire body. Gazef raised his sword.

And in that instant, a mysterious impact radiated out from the sword, and his body floated into the sky.

Gazef couldn’t see anything, but he guessed that he must have been slapped by the tentacle. His body was sent flying through the broad sky which stretched above him.

After sailing through the air for a surprisingly long time, Gazef’s body finally struck the earth. He rolled and rolled and rolled, but this was not the tumbling of a flung corpse. It was the deliberate movement of a human that was trying to bleed off the energy of his rotation.

Gazef slowly stood up, spurring his battered body into motion. He stared at the distant Dark Young.

One hit.

The arm that took the strike had broken. It was sheer good luck that his sword had not broken as well.

The emotion on Gazef’s face vanished.

Why, why had he been saved? Why had it not pursued him?

Because he was not worthy as its opponent, probably. That seemed like the most appropriate answer.

It could not even be considered a total defeat. In order to be defeated, he would have to have fought, and he had not even come close to putting up a fight.

Fresh blood flowed from his bitten lip.

Following that, Gazef suppressed the intense pain which filled him and charged with all his strength.

Even if he couldn’t beat his opponent, even if he could only take one more hit, even so, he still had to protect his King.

However, his footsteps, made with his full conviction and determination, faltered after several paces.

He looked at the Dark Young that had changed direction toward him —there was no mistake here— and he realized why he had managed to survive.

Upon the Dark Young, someone was seated upon what looked like a throne made of tentacles, his posture regal, like a king in governance. Of course, that face was abnormal. It was skeletal, and there was no doubt that it was an undead monster.

He was not nearly foolish enough not to recognize who that king was.

“Ainz Ooal Gown… dono. So you weren’t human after all.”

The Theocracy’s special forces. Gazef had no hope of defeating them, yet they had been easily wiped out. No human could have done that, which made this realization simple to accept.

Yes. Why had he even thought someone that powerful could have been human to begin with?

“Stronoff-sama!”

Even before he looked back, he knew who it was by the hoarseness of the voice. The familiar pair came running toward him.

“You two are fine as well.”

Climb and Brain were unhurt, and Climb hadn’t even gotten a stain on that pure white armor of his. Considering the two of them had not tried to escape at once, that was a considerable stroke of good luck.

“I’m glad you’re safe!”

“I didn’t think you would die, and turns out you didn’t. However, it’s not over yet, right?”

The two of them joined their lines of sight to where Gazef was still looking.

“That is…”

“It can only be one person, Climb-kun. The monster who rules over other monsters. That is Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“That is… that is… How shall I say this… I, I’m sorry.”

At a glance, Climb’s body was shuddering. His stiff, frozen expression betrayed the fact that he was not quaking in excitement or anticipation.

“Don’t worry, Climb-kun. This is nothing to be ashamed of. Or rather, it can’t be helped! A third person whose strength surpasses all rational sense! What has my life become ever since that day!”

Brain radiated a malevolent air as he took a stance. Gazef was surprised at his facial expression, which was casual and easy and did not suit the circumstances.

“I-I won’t run away!”

Climb and Brain stood at Gazef’s side.

Amidst flying chunks of meat, the Dark Young halted in front of Gazef.

Distant screams echoed over, and only this place was silent.

It was as though this area was no longer part of the world.

Ainz’s line of sight turned from Gazef, passed unhappily over Brain, and then halted on Climb. He shrugged, and looked back to Gazef.

“…You’re looking quite lively, Stronoff-dono.”

“I could say the same to you, Gown-dono… huhu. Would that be a problem, to say you’re lively? After all, if you stopped being a human after we parted ways back then, it would be terribly rude.”

“Hahaha. No, I have not changed recently.”

The laughing Ainz floated down from the top of the Dark Young. He must have been using some sort of magical effect, given how he slowly floated down in defiance of gravity.

Although he thought it might be that famous spell ‘Flight’, after considering the fact the Ainz Ooal Gown was a mighty magic caster, he concluded that it must be a superior version of that spell - though how superior it was, or what kind of spell it was, Gazef did not know.

“It’s been a long time, Stronoff-dono. Ever since Carne Village.”

“Indeed it has, Gown-dono. Then… permit me to ask, why have you sought me out? Could it be that you found a familiar face on the battlefield and decided to meet me?”

“Well, yes. I don’t like fancy talk, and twisting words is not appropriate for this place. So… I’ll get right to it.”

Ainz slowly raised a skeletal hand.

There was no enmity there, but instead, it was a gesture of friendship.

“Become my vassal.”

In that instant, Gazef’s eyes widened into circles.

At the same time, one could hear Brain and Climb on both sides of him gulping audibly.

Who could have imagined that such a mighty magic caster could say such a thing to him?

“If you become my vassal—”

Ainz snapped his fingers. How exactly he had done it with skeletal fingers remained a mystery.

As though something had been done to him, Gazef’s body shuddered.

However, there had been no changes in his mind or body. He felt nothing.

“Look around you.”

Gazef turned his eyes to his surroundings. Everything was—

“I see. They’ve stopped.”

The Dark Young had stopped moving, as though frozen in place. The way their hooves had halted mid-stomp was a pose worthy of a statue.

“This is only temporary. What happens after this will depend on your decision. If you refuse, I will give orders to the lambs once more. I trust I don’t need to tell you what those orders are?”

Gazef stared dumbly at Ainz.

Even if he took Gazef as a vassal by using hostages, the bond would lack loyalty, and it would be courting betrayal from within. Surely Ainz must have considered all of this before making his offer.

Then, it meant there must have been some other reason behind his words.

But what it was, Gazef did not know.

Still, there had to be some reason why he —a being who could command an army like this— would specially seek out Gazef.

“How about it? Gazef Stronoff, become my vassal.”

Ainz extended his hand.

If he took that hand, he would save many lives.

Gazef’s heart wavered mightily.

He had been granted the chance to save the lives of the Kingdom’s people.

However — Gazef could not take that hand.

It was a poor decision.

That choice would only satisfy his ego.

A hundred out of a hundred people would curse Gazef for a fool.

Even so, Gazef could not do anything that would betray the Kingdom.

Gazef firmly shook his head in refusal.

“I refuse. I am the sword of the King. For his sake I will gladly throw my life away. On that point I cannot compromise.”

“Even if, in the end, your choice costs more lives? A brave man risked his life to challenge a mighty foe at Carne Village. Will this man now throw others’ lives away that he could have saved?”

Gazef’s heart felt like it was being carved by a knife.

But even then, Gazef Stronoff still could not take Ainz Ooal Gown’s hand.

The Kingdom’s Warrior-Captain could not betray the King.

That was the extent of Gazef's loyalty.

His irritation building in the face of the silent Gazef, Ainz shrugged.

"Such a foolish man. Then—"

Gazef did not allow him to complete the sentence, but turned his blade on Ainz.

"—What?"

He had been injured by the Dark Young, and despite the power of the healing talisman he had not fully recovered. Still, even in this state, Gazef's fighting spirit shone like the sun.

"Gown-dono. Please allow this one who has benefited from your kindness to atone for his rudeness... I wish to request a one-on-one duel with you."

Ainz's face was a fleshless skull. Because of this, one could not tell what kind of expression he had, or discern what he was thinking.

However, for some reason, he seemed speechless. That was what the two others thought as they reviewed the situation after the fact. Although he remained silent, that uneasiness shone through clearly.

“...Are you serious?”

“Naturally.”

“...You will die.”

“There is no doubt of that.”

“If you knew, then why do so? I had no intention of killing you at first… are you suicidal?”

“I do not think I am, no.”

“…What are you thinking? I cannot understand your logic. If you believed you could win and challenged me, I could understand it. If you thought there was a chance of victory under the circumstances, that would be reasonable as well. However, you firmly believe that you will lose. Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“The enemy king stands before me, and he is within the reach of my sword. Is it not natural to see if I can take the head that presents itself?”

“It is true that our physical distance is very close. However, it seems to me that there is an overwhelming gap between us. Am I wrong?”

With a *whoosh*, the sagging tentacles of the Dark Young behind Ainz snapped forth, striking up clods of dirt from the earth beside Gazef.

Gazef’s eyes could not follow the tentacles thrashing the ground beside him.

“That may be so, Gown-dono.”

“Are you pushing your luck because I said I did not want to kill you?”

Gazef laughed from the bottom of his heart.

“Certainly not. I simply wish to do what I, as the Warrior-Captain of the Kingdom, should do. That is all I was thinking.”

“...If I accept your challenge, you do realize I will slay you without restraint? It is only expected.”

“Indeed it is.”

“So that’s how it will be… even after I’ve said all this, you refuse to change your mind. What a shame. Speaking as a collector, it is a poor thing to have to destroy rare specimens.”

Gazef had no intention of backing down.

This was an unbelievable stroke of luck. To begin with, Ainz, who surrounded himself with incredible subordinates, was now standing in front of him without any bodyguards.

On top of that, his pride as a mighty individual meant that he would not order the Dark Young behind him into action.

He would never get a chance like this again.

His enemy stood on a perch that he could not reach with both hands. However, right now, he had a chance to bridge the gap between them.

The next time they met, he would probably surround himself with ten or twenty layers of guards, as befitted a magic caster who was poor in close combat. Gazef would never get within sword range of Ainz again. Because of that, he had challenged Ainz to a duel.

And there was another reason for the duel.

Although the chance he was banking on was far too slim a hope, even so—

Gazef issued his formal challenge.

“Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown-dono! My name is Gazef Stronoff, the Warrior-Captain of the Kingdom of Re-Estize! I formally request a duel with you!”

“Warrior-Captain...”

“Gazef!”

Unable to hold it back any more, Brain cried out. But Gazef continued without hesitation.

“If you find it acceptable, Sorcerer King-dono, I pray you will find these two suitable witnesses for our combat.”

Ainz shrugged.

Go ahead, it seemed to say. When Gazef realised this, he nodded.

“Wait, wait a minute! Hang on, Gazef! I can always die alongside you! Don’t go alone! My lord Sorcerer-King! Please, I beg you! I know this is shameless beyond belief, but this is a heartfelt request! Please allow us both to face you! I know it won’t inconvenience you in the slightest!”

As he heard Brain’s strangled plea, Gazef thought, *as I expected…*

The expression he had seen on Brain’s face then was that of a warrior that had embraced his fate.

It was the determination that he would be killed along with Gazef, by Ainz Ooal Gown.

However, he did not accept it. He could not accept it.

“Brain Unglaus! Do you wish to stain my conviction as a warrior?”

Brain’s face was a picture of shock.

“—That is fine, Stronoff-dono. I don’t mind taking you two on at once.”

“Please don’t, Sorcerer King-dono. This duel is with me. I pray you will spare the two over there.”

The pinpoints of red light floating in Ainz’s skeletal eyesockets glowed even brighter.

“...What is this. I’ve seen those eyes before. The eyes of a man who embraced his death and ran to it. Firm, unyielding eyes. How admirable.”

Ainz was speaking like a human being.

“Very well. I accept your proposal. I will solo PvP Stronoff-dono.”

Brain fell to his knees, powerless.

His face couldn’t be seen, but droplets of rain spattered on the crimson earth below him.

I’m sorry.

Gazef told Brain in his heart.

“The corpse will be returned after the appropriate preservation. It will facilitate the use of resurrection magic—”

“—There is no need for that.”

Gazef’s words left both his friends and enemies speechless.

“I do not wish to be brought back to life. You may dispose of the body here if you wish.”

It wasn’t that resurrection magic was bad. However, Gazef disliked it.

Everyone only had one life.

It was because of that, that the decision to stake one’s life could be so meaningful.

And so, even for his Kingdom, he would not come back from the dead.

If Gazef died, then the King could spread the news that he had lost an important subject. That way, perhaps he could soften the storm of resentment and hatred that would be born from the loss of so many of the Kingdom’s people.

This was a final act of loyalty from the Kingdom’s Warrior-Captain, who had chosen to act of his own selfish will.

Ignoring the surprised stares around him, Gazef smiled calmly.

“Then, let us begin. You two, I hope you will bear witness to my final battle.”

Climb could not have imagined that the man called Brain Unglaus could have shown such a soft and sensitive side to himself.

He knew that Brain was powerful, spirited and free-willed. However, the man lowering his head did not look like that at all. However, even if he was like that, he did not look soft or weak either.

“Brain. Will you not fulfil your mission?”

Gazef spoke these words without looking back.

Brain did not move. The way his hands clawed at the ground conveyed his grief to Climb. Even so, Climb had to say it.

“…This is Stronoff-sama’s last wish.”

He did not think Gazef Stronoff could win at all.

That was why Climb and Brain had to fulfill Gazef’s final request.

Slowly, Brain rose to his feet

It was hot.

It made Climb want to turn tail and run.

There seemed to be some kind of hot air propelling Brain upwards.

“...I’ve made you see the disgraceful side of me, Climb-kun. It’s all right. I will engrave Gazef’s noble form into my eyes.”

“...Thank you.”

What kind of relationship did Brain Unglaus and Gazef Stronoff have?

Climb could not understand the tie between them, especially on Brain’s side.

After losing to Gazef, he had embarked on a journey to advance his sword skills. This was the Brain that Climb knew. However, he felt that things were not that simple.

“Then, Stronoff-dono. Could you let me take a look at that sword? There’s something I wish to know.”

Ainz made that request like he was asking about the weather. Enchanted swords could have all kinds of abilities imbued into them. Examining one would be like revealing the inner workings of one’s strategy. By common sense, nobody would ever agree to that proposal.

Climb was not the only person who had thought that way, which was why Brain’s eyes also went wide at what happened next.

Gazeff turned his sword a full 180 degrees and presented the hilt to Ainz.

“Gazef! Have you completely given up on winning?!”

“Brain! Don’t say such shameful things! The Sorcerer King is not that kind of man.”

Ainz held the sword and cast a spell. After that, he laughed.

“Well, this sword is quite impressive.”

Ainz returned the sword to Gazef hilt-first, the same way it had been given to him.

“Stronoff-dono. Do you have any idea of this sword’s power?”

“I fully understand it. This sword has an unreal sharpness that can cut metal like paper.”

“What a shame. That’s only a part of the sword’s power.”

“—What? What does that mean, Sorcerer King-dono?”

“Well, in short, this sword is a weapon that can kill me. Something like that is the absolute minimum condition for a solo PVP duel. Without a weapon that can harm me, this would be nothing more than an execution. Sorry for comparing you to the rats that entered my fortress,”

Ainz muttered as he suddenly produced a shortsword out of nowhere.

Without hesitation, he dragged the edge of that magnificent blade across his face in a forceful slice.

It did not leave so much as a scratch.

“Weakly enchanted objects like this cannot harm this body of mine. For reference, this shortsword is imbued with about as much data —or rather, as much mana— as that sword you bear, Stronoff-dono. However, your sword can harm me, in clear defiance of what I know to be true. Could I request that sword as a trophy after I win?”

Gazef smiled thinly.

“Forgive me for refusing, but this sword is a national treasure.”

“Mm. No-loot PVP, then? Very well. I will honor that request.”

“My deepest thanks, Sorcerer King-dono.”

After returning the sword to Gazef, Ainz stroked his chin in thought. He backed up, one step at a time, as though conforming to some regulated distance between them.

“I think this should be about five meters. And… because there’s no countdown, we will need a signal. You, in the white armor. Find something to start us off.”

Having been suddenly named, Climb shuddered.

“Climb, please.”

“Then, then I have a magical handbell here. I’ll ring it, and it will signal the start.”

The two of them nodded silently to Climb’s proposal.

Gazef raised his sword, pointing it at his enemy’s eyes. Strength suffused every fiber of his being. in the eyes of Climb who stood behind him, Gazef’s body seemed to grow larger before his eyes.

This was an overwhelming sword aura. He had never seen the true pressure the Kingdom’s Warrior-Captain could exert. Yet, his body seemed distant and illusory, like a mirage.

“Stronoff-sama…”

This was the last time he would see Gazef alive.

“It’s not guaranteed.”

“—Eh?”

Suddenly, Brain issued a denial to Climb from where he was standing, by his side.

“There’s no guarantee Gazef will lose. The chances are extremely low, but there’s still a chance of victory. That guy has a killer move, you know? The martial art he uses as a trump card?”

“The ‘Sixfold Slash of Light’?”

Brain smiled calmly.

“No. It’s an ultimate martial art that far surpasses it. That fellow learned it.”

“What, what is that?!”

As Climb prepared his bell, he looked to the raised sword, and to Gazef’s face, filled with his laser-like focus.

The steely face of the man hailed as the Warrior-Captain, by all the surrounding countries.

“Ah. It came from a former adamantite-ranked adventurer of the Kingdom. It was a martial art invented by Vestia Croft Di Lofan, but he could not use it because of his advanced age. If my greatest secret move, the ‘Nail Clipper’ is the result of using multiple martial arts at once, Gazef’s killer trump is the strongest single technique. Who knows, that blow… it might even be able to reach Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Perhaps that was why he had asked for a one-on-one duel, Brain said while his eyes did not leave the scene before him.

Climb swallowed. The hand holding the bell felt heavy. Once he rang it, Gazef’s fate would be sealed.

“Want to swap with me?”

“...Thank you. But… I’ll do it.”

What, Brain mumbled, but he did not say anything else.

Climb raised the bell. He could only pray that victory went to

Gazef.

And then —louder than expected— the bell rang.

His consciousness focused to the absolute limit, Gazef stepped in with an unbelievable speed—

Without missing a single moment, Brain and Climb opened their eyes and watched—

—and faster than any of them, the world went quiet.

“Like I was saying… time-stop countermeasures are important.”

Because Ainz had instantly cast a ‘Silent Time Stop’, Gazef, his sword raised high, was frozen in front of Ainz.

No attacks would work while time was stopped. Even if he used attack magic to barrage Gazef, it would cause him no harm. Because of that, Ainz cast a spell while keeping track of the time.

“「Delay Magic: True Death」.”

This was a ninth-tier spell.

Because ‘Grasp Heart’ was a more convenient spell, he did not use this one often.

If no spell could affect an enemy while time-stopped, then all one needed to do was delay the activation of the spell until the moment the ‘Time Stop’ ended. Although it was a simple combination attack in theory, the trick was getting the timing right, which was extremely difficult. As such, only about 5% of all magic-users could pull it off.

After much training and practice, Ainz was in that 5% as well.

“...Farewell, Gazef Stronoff. I never hated you.”

The spell ended, and time returned to the world.

Right after that, the other spell activated before anything else.

—Gazef slowly fell.

“Eh?”

“Wha-what?”

Climb and Brain had no idea of what had just happened.

In the moment Gazef had charged out, he had suddenly fallen over.

Ainz stepped forward to catch Gazef’s body.

His sword fell from nerveless fingers, and fell to the ground.

The battle was over.

Yet, there was no way to comprehend it.

Nobody knew what was going on.

“What on earth happened…?”

“The hell should I know!”

Brain gave voice to an angry cry.

“What’s wrong? Get up! Gazef!”

And then Brain’s earnest hope was flatly denied.

“He is dead.”

Respectfully, perhaps even reverently, the Sorcerer King Ainz laid Gazef upon the ground. After that, he slowly closed the man’s wide-open eyes.

While looking at Gazef’s face, he spoke to the two people nearby.

“...Seeing how he made a challenge with no chance of winning reminded me of that time. In honor of the Warrior-Captain, I will order the Dark Young to stand down. His body will be returned to you.”

“...No, there’s no need for that. We will bring Gazef back. There’s no need to trouble you.”

Climb exhaled heavily.

Would Brain challenge Ainz to a hopeless battle? he wondered, However, there was no need for that.

“Is that so,” Ainz replied before standing back up.

“The instant death spell I used, ‘True Death’, will invalidate lower-tier resurrection magic. Tell this to the people of the Kingdom. Tell them I will be merciful to those who submit respectfully.”

Ainz lightly floated into the air.

Even as they saw his defenseless back, the two of them knew they could not commit such a shameful act as attacking from behind.

Ainz sat on the tentacle of the Dark Young.

It was truly a terrifying throne.

“Cede E-Rantel and the surrounding areas to me and these lambs will not frolic through the royal capital. Tell the King this, when you see him again.”

The Dark Young turned and left, and the other four Dark Young also began making their way back to the Imperial castrum.

“Climb-kun. I have one request...Could I bring Gazef-dono back?”

“...Very well. Then I will bring Stronoff-sama’s sword home.”

“A lot of people died.”

“Yeah, too many to count.”

“...What just happened?”

“I don’t know. But, if someone like that calls himself a king and claims this territory…”

“In the future, a war will definitely break out. And who knows, the dead may outnumber the corpses here today.”

Walking behind Brain, who was carrying Gazef on his back, Climb’s thoughts turned to the future of the Kingdom, wreathed in clouds.

Brain’s words would definitely come true. What was important was what he could do, and then, what he would do.

And the most important thing was

—*I have to protect Renner-sama.*

Climb clenched his fist, and steeled himself. At the very least, he had to protect his mistress, no matter the cost.

Epilogue

The cold night wind whistled past.

It stirred up Brain Unglaus’ hair and ruffled his clothes as well.

“…It’s freezing out here…”

The cold wind swept away his pale white breath and his mumbling and carried them into the distance.

Even the deepest parts of his body felt like they were frozen.

Brain was staring aimlessly from atop the walls of E-Rantel, where the three of them had stood together before they had moved out with the army.

There was nothing out there except darkness.

During the battle— no, the massacre of the Kattse Plains, many of the Kingdom’s people had lost their lives.

He remembered what he had seen when he crawled off that battlefield.

The defeated people dragged their feet lifelessly, their clothes were tattered and they looked utterly wretched.

Even though Brain was a warrior who trod the edge of life and death on a regular basis, the image of that hellscape —created by a single magic caster— was seared into his eyes.

Although E-Rantel —protected by its city walls— could not be considered a safe place by any means, the fleeing soldiers, tired and worn out from exhaustion, collapsed like puppets whose strings had been cut. They curled up anywhere they could, and slept as if they were dead.

Upon this unmanned tower, Brain slowly exhaled again.

Then, he looked silently to the sky.

“I just keep thinking… nothing really matters anymore.”

Brain looked at his hands.

While he was carrying the lifeless body of that man, he felt a massive weight pressing down on him. Try as he might, he could not forget it.

He was a great man, and the greatest rival, who had always been a step ahead.

That man —Gazef Stronoff— his death was a very real loss to

Brain.

To Brain, Gazef was no mere rival. His existence could not be summed up by just that one word.

It was because that man fought him during the martial tournament, because he had roundly defeated Brain and his ever-growing pride, because of Brain’s burning desire to defeat Gazef, it was because of all of these that Brain had become the person Gazef was not.

Brain Unglaus lived, grew and refined himself because of Gazef. The strength of the man called Gazef was enough for Brain to invest his life into surpassing it. He had been like an impassable wall… and the closest thing he had to a father.

And then, the thing he should have surpassed no longer existed.

Gazef Stronoff stood tall, like a majestic mountain, even as he passed into death in front of Brain.

Brain once saw the true meaning of power in the form of Shalltear Bloodfallen. So for a time, he had lost himself in depression and could not free himself.

Because he was overly confident and relied on the fact he was strong, when Shalltear smashed his confidence, he knew he was weak. The Brain who stood here now could admit that.

But Gazef was different.

“Ainz Ooal Gown must surely be a monster of the same caliber as Shalltear Bloodfallen. And Gazef challenged him anyway.”

At that time, Gazef did not request the duel for a worthless reason like his own survival. The conviction he displayed was completely different from the way Brain had flailed his sword wildly at Shalltear while crying like a baby.

What on earth made him do that?

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t you run?”

Forcing the words out was like coughing up blood.

“Why did you choose to die? Wouldn’t it have been fine to run from that monster? Wouldn’t it have been like conserving your strength? Why?! If you had to die, I wanted to go with you!”

If he couldn’t surpass Gazef, then he wanted to die with him.

Brain turned his vision to the weapon at his waist.

It was Razor’s Edge, which he was temporarily allowed to carry.

Brain drew Razor’s Edge, and activated the martial art.

“「Fourfold Slash of Light」.”

The technique Gazef used to defeat Brain in the martial tournament.

Four arcs of light cleaved the nearby railing to pieces. There was virtually no resistance and the blade flowed through the metal like it was water.

“You… like this… I admired you… I wanted to die with you. Why wouldn’t you let me fight by your side? Why didn’t you tell me that I could die with you!”

Brain covered his face.

His eyes were hot, but the tears did not flow.

At this moment, a steady sound of footsteps filtered into Brain’s ears. Only one person would come here.

“I heard that when men get older, the tears don’t flow any more. I guess that’s true.”

“I think the pain of losing someone precious to you has nothing to do with age.”

It was the hoarse voice he expected.

“…Forgive me, Climb-kun. In the end, I left everything to you.”

Brain rubbed his eyes, and sheathed his sword. Climb stood before him, a bizarre expression on his face.

“However…well, even if I was there, it would have been useless, right? Under these circumstances, nobody’s going to try and kill the King. Tell me, what happened after that?”

“Yes. Because Prince Barbro hasn’t returned until now, they decided to send out a search party for him.”

And because they couldn’t spare enough soldiers for this duty, they were planning to use adventurers instead.

“After that, there was the matter of ceding E-Rantel — it was a unanimous decision. All the nobles approved. Even the King agreed.”

Even the nobles of the Royal faction had approved.

During the demonic disturbance, the power of the royal faction had grown. Although this increase in power meant that they could mobilize the vast army they had sent to the

Kattse Plains, it also meant that the grievous losses they suffered there would have massive consequences. And if they gave away E-Rantel, which was directly administered by the Crown, then the royal family would be the ones losing the most. This was probably done purely out of the desire to survive.

This time round, the royal faction had been severely weakened, while the noble faction had grown stronger.

What would all of this mean for the future?

He inadvertently glanced toward Climb, and saw his body shaking.

He wasn’t trembling in anger, but in fear. He must have remembered the horrific sights from back then, and his trembling was probably a sign that he was screaming internally. That absolute despair must still be coiling around his body and heart.

“…Even now, when I think about them, my body shakes uncontrollably.”

‘They’ must have been the inhumanly strong things at the battlefield.

In his memories, he saw Climb standing with him, against the

Sorcerer King. *Maybe he knew the answer,* he thought.

“Hey, tell me something. Why did Gazef ask for the duel?”

Climb’s face was a picture of surprise. Just as he was wondering if he hadn’t spoken clearly, and was about to repeat himself, Climb answered him.

“This is just my personal opinion, is that all right?”

“Ah, well, it’s fine, go ahead.”

“…Could it be that he wanted to show it to us?”

“…Show what to us?”

“The power of the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown. And then… he must have wanted to give us a future.”

“A future?”

“Yes. It was so that we’ll have some tactics and information in case we have to do battle with him in future.”

That was a bolt from the blue.

It fit perfectly. Climb had the right answer.

That man had bet his life in order to squeeze out what little information he could for them. Although, he didn't think that the Sorcerer King, as a magic caster, would willingly enter melee combat again without bodyguards by his side. Even so, he still staked his life on the miraculous, hope-against-hope possibility that it might happen again. Then, who would he entrust that opportunity to?

Brain laughed at himself. *I never even thought that might be the case.*

In that case… how would he live on, now that he knew what Gazef's thoughts were.

As Brain lost himself in thought, Climb asked a question, as though he were unable to bear the silence.

"…If I'm not wrong, Stronoff-sama won't allow himself to be revived?"

"Gazef was that kind of man."

Even if they used resurrection magic, it didn't necessarily mean the dead would come back to life. The legends said that people who were happy with their lives would refuse resurrection.

"The King doesn't seem to have accepted that yet."

“That’s only to be expected. However, that guy won’t be back… Still, it’s quite a surprise.”

“Yes. I don’t understand what Gazef-sama was thinking. Shouldn’t he come back to life and continue pledging his loyalty? It’s what I would do.”

“Is that so? As for you, Climb, I think you would do that. As for me… don’t bring me back after I die. I’m not happy with how I lived and… I don’t think I could bear to go on with it.”

“For my part, I would still choose to return. I want to grind this body to dust in service to Renner-sama, if I can afford to.”

Only one person in the Kingdom could use resurrection magic. There was no doubt the price she would ask would be staggering… but that was the price of defying the grave.

During the demonic disturbance, all the adventurers technically belonged to the same team so there was an exception, but under normal circumstances, resurrection would cost a sizeable amount. It was a sum that would make one’s eyes pop out, and normal civilians or soldiers could work their whole lives and never be able to afford it. The same went for Climb.

Your Princess-sama would gladly pay up, Brain didn’t say. Instead, he replied, “Is that so?”

The silence descended on them again. This time, Brain broke it.

“I really wanted to defeat that guy…”

Climb didn’t answer. And Brain didn’t want him to answer either. No, if he thought about it rationally, these words were useless to Climb. However, he didn’t know why, but he had to say them, all the things he’d been piling up in his heart.

“In the past, I lost to him. So I thought I wanted to beat him. But now, that’s impossible… Ah, I let him get away,” Brain said as he looked to the night sky. “Dammit…”

“…Brain-san.”

What should I do?

What should I do about Gazef’s will?

“No, it should be like this. What am I confused about? There’s only two choices. Carry it on, or don’t carry it on. I want to… triumph? Ah, is it like that…”

Wasn’t there only one answer, in the end?

Brain’s face sported a fierce smile, and he raised Razor’s

Edge to the sky.

“Hmph! Anyone can carry it on or whatever!”

Brain shouted loudly, from the bottom of his heart.

“You chose to die! How dare you take the easy way out! Go regret it in the other world! I — I will, I will surpass you in my own way! Climb! Let’s go drink! Let’s get some wine and have some fun!”

He didn’t know what to do.

However, he knew that he didn’t want to simply inherit Gazef’s will. If he did that, no matter what he did, he’d never be able to beat him.

Besides, in future, he’d probably end up thinking about Gazef over and over again. But for now, he could lose himself, and forget.

He clapped his hand on Climb’s shoulder, and forcefully stepped forth. The weight on his hands seemed to lighten, if only a little.

Brand New Chapter

Everyone looked forward to the coming of spring. This was more so on the part of the peasants, who could feel the earth coming back to life under their feet. However, even city residents welcomed spring as well. Granted, spring in the cities was largely a matter of not having to buy kindling for warmth.

On the first day of spring in E-Rantel, however, all that greeted it was silence.

The main streets were devoid of people, as if they had all died. Still, from the gaps in the shutters and doors — cracked open just a little — one could sense something from the houses that faced the streets. It felt as though people were holding their breath and peeking at the world outside.

Today was the day when E-Rantel would be officially ceded to Ainz Ooal Gown and become a city in the Sorcerous Kingdom of Nazarick.

The first city gate opened, and bells of welcome pealed forth.

After much time had passed, the second city gate opened, and the bells echoed through the city once more.

Between the second and the third doors was the residential zone of the city.

The reason the residents of E-Rantel had not fled was because they knew even if they escaped, all that awaited them was despair.

Even if they were masters or expert tradesmen in E-Rantel, in other cities, they would have to start over as apprentices.

Cities with long histories had a social order and hierarchies. Outsiders who were new to the city would naturally need to start from the lowest, most junior positions. That was to say, even if they fled to another city, most of them would not be able to find a proper job, and they would live and die as paupers in the slums.

As such, most of the residents remained in E-Rantel.

However, if their lives were in danger, they would choose to flee. That was only sensible. After all, the gossip about the new ruler, no, their new king, was that he was a fearsome being.

They said he was a magic caster who massacred the Royal Army.

They said he was a cold-blooded creature who looked like an undead being.

They said he was a monster that enjoyed bathing in the fresh blood of children.

The rumors circulating were all of this nature, with hardly a single positive word about him.

And so, everyone hid behind their doors, planning to spy on Ainz Ooal Gown from between the gaps in their windows.

Before long, Ainz Ooal Gown’s procession arrived on the main street.

All who saw him lost the power of speech.

He was a being who matched the rumors circulating about him.

The first person they saw could still be considered alright. At the head of the contingent was a beautiful woman who was as radiant as the full moon.

She wore a diaphanous white dress, with silky black hair and alabaster skin. Her body, adorned with constellation-patterned jewelry, was beyond the realm of lust and envy. However, the fact that she sprouted horns from her head and long black wings from her waist, in addition to her supernatural beauty, were all signs that she was not human.

Behind this beautiful goddess were the warriors. As they looked at them, the residents shuddered uncontrollably.

The warriors were divided into two groups, differentiated by the styles of armor they wore.

If the first group were to be summarized in a phrase, it would be “death knights.”

In their left hands they carried tower shields which covered three quarters of their bodies, and in their right they carried wavy-bladed swords, like flamberges.

Including their tattered black capes, their massive frames were more than two meters tall. Their black metal, full-body armor was covered in wavy crimson patterns, reminiscent of blood vessels. It was also covered in spikes. They looked like physical incarnations of brutality.

The faces of their helmets — which sprouted demonic horns — were open. Within were the remains of rotted faces. Their empty eye-sockets blazed with a crimson fire, filled with hatred for the living and a longing for slaughter.

The second group could best be described as “death warriors.”

They carried long-bladed swords, while various weapons hung on their waists; hand axes, warhammers, crossbows, whips, rapiers, and other weapons. All of them bore many dents and scratches — proof that they had been heavily used.

They were roughly two meters tall, and the armor they wore was comparatively light. Their bodies were clad in leather armor made from the hide of some unknown beast. The ruined armor, both arms, and parts of their faces were covered in spell-strips — strips of cloth covered in arcane runes.

The only thing that could be seen from between the strips were the ruins of human features, similar to those of the death knights.

Everyone could feel an overwhelming power radiating from this contingent, and as the palanquin carried by several of these beings came into view, the shock they had experienced faded into the background.

An undead being sat on the palanquin. An oppressive aura of death floated around him, a black mist that roiled like a maelstrom. Beyond him, an obsidian radiance shone from behind his back.

Just by instincts alone, anyone would know who this was.

It was Ainz Ooal Gown.

We cannot possibly survive under the rule of this monster; our lives will be short and stunted things. Just as everyone started to think this, the sound of a door opening carried through the air.

In order to see what was going on, the citizens of E-Rantel pressed their eyes to their gaps and slits to peek outside. What they saw was the form of a running child. He held something in his hand and he was sprinting towards Ainz Ooal Gown's parade of inhuman beings. Behind him, his pale-faced mother was chasing him.

"Give me back my daddy!"

The boy's young voice echoed through the streets.

"Give me back my daddy! You monster!"

The boy threw something. It was a rock.

The rock flew toward the parade — its target was Ainz Ooal Gown.

Perhaps it was due to nervousness or tension, but the rock fell short of its mark and rolled across the cobbled road.

His mother who caught up with him had the look of a dead person. She knew what would happen to them now.

The mother hugged up her son from behind as her body shuddered. She desperately tried to conceal the boy’s body in her arms.

“He, he’s just a boy! Please, I beg you! I beg you to forgive him!”

In response to the mother’s frantic plea, the radiant angel smiled.

They were saved. That was a warm, motherly smile that would put anyone’s heart at ease.

“—Ten thousand deaths will not suffice to atone for the crime of disrespecting Ainz-sama. We shall start with one.”

And then, the beautiful woman produced a gigantic battleaxe out of nowhere. The fact that she could wield it so easily spoke of her superhuman arm strength.

The uses for that axe were very easy to imagine, and the things they imagined were vivid indeed.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, as a breeder who raised a worthless head of livestock.”

As she watched the slowly-approaching woman, the mother realised what was going to happen to them, and hugged her child tightly.

“Please! Spare my son, even if it’s just my son! Take my life, do anything you want to me! Please!”

“What are you saying? Is there a reason to kill you? Ainz-sama does not enjoy meaningless slaughter. The innocent will not be killed. Please rest at ease and await the mincemeat that will be made for you… although if it was up to me, I would prefer to turn him into a croquette.”

The boy in his mother’s arms didn’t seem to realize that he would soon be slain. However, anyone watching knew that the child’s short life would end in a scant few seconds. Yet, nobody was willing to step forward to save him.

Although they wanted to turn their eyes from the impending tragedy, nobody could pull themselves away.

Be it mother or child, everyone was transfixed by the murderous aura that the beauty emitted.

“Regret your crime of rudeness against the most exalted one as you die.”

In the moment Albedo swung down her massive axe, the world shuddered as the sound of metal clashing against metal rang out. The source of that sound was a thrown greatsword that had buried itself into the earth, interposing itself like a shield between the pitiful mother and son, and the beautiful woman.

That sword — and its wielder — was known to every person on the street.

A living legend.

An invincible warrior.

A gentle hero.

As they beheld the entrance of the only being who could save the two of them, the people sang the name of the swordsman in their hearts.

The name of the Dark Hero, Momon.

A man clad in jet-black armor slowly emerged from one end of the alley, and wrenched out the greatsword stuck into the ground. With a mighty flick of his wrist, he shook the dirt off of it. His other hand was already holding his sword, and the battle-ready Momon faced the beautiful woman down.

“Is there a need to use so much force on a boy throwing a stone? Nobody’ll want to marry you.”

“Even if you lecture me, I won’t be hap… Kuh! The sin of rudeness against Ainz-sama knows no age or gender. All who commit it must perish!”

“And what happens if I don’t allow it?”

“Then you will be a traitor to the lord of the land, and will be exterminated!”

“Is that so? Well, that’s not a bad thing. However, don’t think you can take this head so easily, hm? If you want it, you’d better be prepared to risk yours as well.”

Momon deftly spun the swords in his hands and took a fighting stance. That bold and dominating posture was surely the stuff heroes were made of.

“You, protect Ainz-sama.”

After giving an order to the black-armored warriors, the beauty readied her battleaxe in turn.

The spectators wanted to believe that the winner of this confrontation would be Momon. But the battle aura radiating from the two of them denied it. They could feel that the beautiful woman was a warrior who was Momon’s equal.

The two of them shortened the distance between themselves into the range of meters. And the one who disrupted the impending conflict between the two was Ainz Ooal Gown himself. By the power of magic, he soundlessly flew up from the palanquin and landed upon the earth, before putting a hand on the beauty’s shoulder.

“Ainz-sama!”

He leaned in and placed his mouth to the beauty’s ear before whispering into it. Her face lit up with a gentle, lovestruck smile.

“I understand, Ainz-sama. It shall be as you say.”

She bowed to Ainz, and then pointed her axe at Momon. However, her murderous intent from just now was absent.

“…I have not yet heard your name. Speak it.”

“I am Momon.”

“What? Momon. Then, I ask you. Do you think you can defeat us?”

“…No, I cannot. Even if I fought to the death, I can only defeat either you, or the one beside you.”

Despair filled the hearts of all who heard these words. It was because they knew that even the great hero could only kill one of those monsters.

“And besides… if I fought with all my strength, many innocents would be caught up in our battle. I cannot do such a thing.”

“How foolish. Despite your impressive skills, you would — I’ve spoken too much. Ainz-sama has a proposal for you. Listen to it with gratitude. Surrender and swear fealty to us as a warrior of Nazarick.”

“—Are you kidding me?”

“How rude. Ainz-sama does not wish to rule these streets with despair and bloodshed. The extinction of all humanity would not offer any benefits to Ainz-sama. But even if we said this, the people here would not believe it. So we will have you do Ainz-sama’s work as his subordinate.”

“…What’s that all about?”

“In the future, there may be more fools who would throw stones at Ainz-sama. At that point, we will have you remove their heads. In exchange, we will permit you to be a witness, in order to prove that Ainz-sama will not allow the innocent to suffer in his city."

"…I see. So, as his enforcer, will I be serving from beside him?"

"Not quite. As I said, you will be responsible for eliminating traitors. Consider it to be a form of self-representation, combined with the role of an enforcer."

"I have no intention of swearing myself to the service of evil."

"Neither do we have any plans of perpetrating that sort of evil. Then, what will you do? If you will not pledge your sword to Ainz-sama, then you shall be slain as a dangerous individual, no matter how many people we have to kill to get to you."

Momon looked around.

"I intend to travel, and I have no intention of being anyone's subordinate."

"That is also an acceptable answer. Then, shall we begin the collateral damage to the surrounding people now?"

"Wait! Don't jump to conclusions. I haven't made my decision yet. I also have a partner. What will happen to her?"

"She must pledge herself to Ainz-sama as well. There can be no other answer.”

“Although in the past, I put my objective of traveling as a priority… it seems I’ve gotten myself entangled with this city. Will it be alright if I don’t kneel?”

Ainz once more whispered into the ear of the beauty.

“That is permissible, and so it is decided. Momon, work hard for Ainz-sama.”

“…I understand. But remember that if you harm the people of the city for no reason, this sword will be aimed at you and your master.”

“…In that case, when the people of this city rise up in revolt against Ainz-sama, I hope that sword will also be pointed at those who rebel. It doesn’t matter if they are children or not. I look forward to the time when this city will rise up against us, and to your agonized face as you execute its people. Then, we shall be going ahead first. Do join up with us afterwards.”

Ainz Ooal Gown’s entourage continued steadily forward. After the long procession had finally faded out of sight, the people streamed out of their homes. It was amazing how so many people managed to keep themselves so well hidden.

Everyone was praising Momon.

Just as Momon started using his hands to wave away the tide of adoration, a sound rang out clearly over the crowd. It was the sound of the mother slapping her son.

“Why did you do that?!”

Again and again, she slapped her son.

Both mother and child were crying, but even so, she didn’t stop hitting him.

Momon grasped the mother’s hand.

“Could you let him be for now? There’s something I’d like to ask him.”

“This boy has caused so much trouble for you, Momon-sama! We sincerely apologize from the bottoms of our hearts!”

“No, please, pay it no heed. There’s no need to apologize, Ah, there’s no need to cry either. I have some questions for you.”

As Momon tried to hush the boy‘s crying, he asked the boy why he had done it.

Everyone thought the boy must have wanted to avenge his father, but the boy said that after a strange man lectured him, he felt that he had to throw the rock.

“I see… dear mother, there’s no need to punish your child. This might be the result of magical control. It’s a plot by the Theocracy, trying to force me into a confrontation with Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“…No, the Theocracy wouldn’t do that. Isn’t it Ainz Ooal Gown’s plot to make Momon-sama into his vassal?”

Momon nodded deeply to the shopkeeper who spoke. He had opened his shop here just a couple of years ago.

“That is certainly a possibility. But on the other hand, it is also a good opportunity. Since I have an excuse to be by his side, I can monitor his movements. If he plans to harm you, I will take his head. But in exchange, I hope you will not revolt against Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“Why shouldn’t we?! As long as we have Momon-sama—”

“—Please do not continue that line of conversation. They are waiting for someone to speak those words. If the idea of rebellion comes up, he will order me to kill you. Perhaps that’s what they’ve been hoping for.”

Momon spread his arms, and continued speaking to everyone openly.

“I cannot be the one who breaks the agreement made just now. Because of that, I hope everyone will be able to bear with anything unreasonable they say. However, if anyone feels they are being treated poorly, please inform me.”

As they realized that Momon was saying he was a hostage, the faces of the people took on pained looks.

To those people, Momon smiled gently.

“However, I hope you will not worry too much. To begin, that fellow might end up being a good dictator. Let’s wait and see. Also, if the Theocracy makes a move, they might try to incite you to revolt. I hope you will all keep your eyes open.”

Nobody could accept this from the bottom of their hearts.

But at the same time, nobody could voice their opposition to him.

Ainz Ooal Gown was undead. Nobody could trust a dangerous being like that which bore a hatred for the living. And, of course, everybody trusted Momon. In fact, Momon had even given up on his goals for the sake of the city folk. It was only natural that they would give their allegiance to Momon in turn.

Everyone present agreed with Momon’s proposal, and after promising to spread these words to the people around them, they dispersed.

As a result, E-Rantel became a place the neighboring countries scarcely believed could exist, a peaceful city without bloodshed, existing under the rule of Ainz Ooal Gown.

Afterword

Thanks to everybody who read Volume 9. For some reason, it became another big and heavy volume for some reason.

When I first started writing, I asked the editor “Since there’s not much to write for this volume, It should be around 200 pages, right?”. But when I received the printed volume, I wondered “Why is it so thick?”
It’s very strange.

It’s really strange. Where did the all pages beyond page 200 come from?

But I do want to try finishing a volume that’s around 300 pages long and not 300 pages each for just Part 1 and Part 2.

Either way, I don’t know what happened, but the developments in the next volume will be completely different from the web novel, so please look forward to it. I’m going to say that Volume 10 will be 300 pages long.

Speaking of which, last week, the “Overlord” manga drawn by Fukayama Fugin-sensei went on sale. This week, Volume 9 of the light novel came out, and next week will be the start of the Overlord animation broadcast. These 3 weeks will be full of Overlord.

We produced a great work thanks to the help of everyone working on it. (Especially so-bin sama… He has so much work to do, it makes me tear up everytime I think about it. It's like… well it's not like I don't feel like choking myself on several occasion either.) I hope you all can enjoy the manga, the novel and the anime.

And now for, the usual acknowledgements.

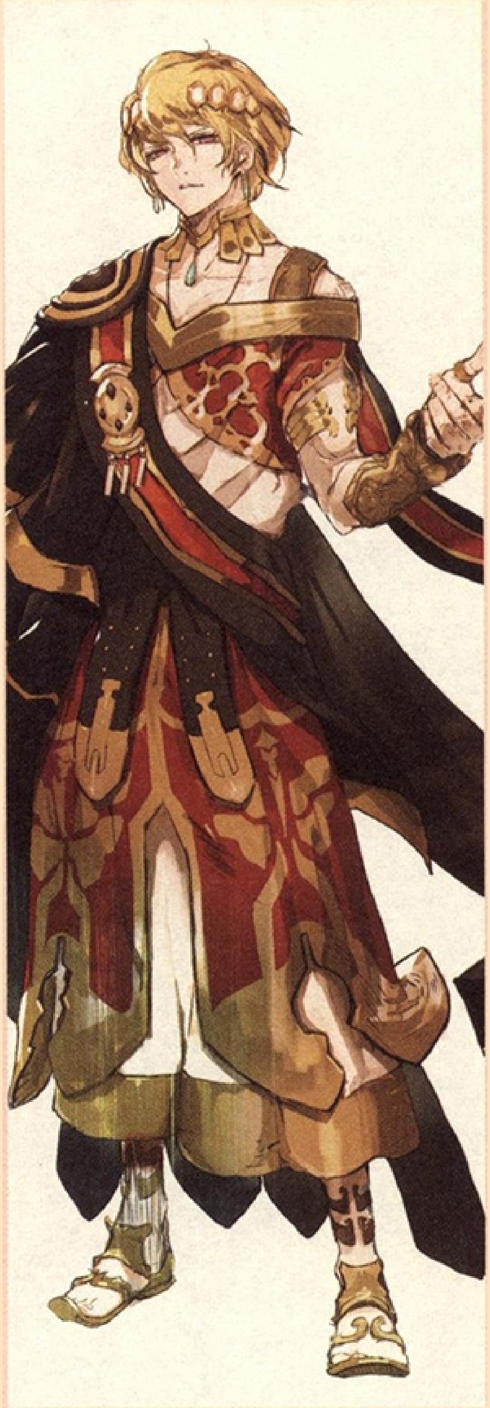
I thank so-bin sama for his amazing illustrations and working on the animation and manga with all his soul.

The designer, Chord Design Studio not only worked on the light novel, but on the Overlord animation's logo as well. The anime logos are cool and amazing. Murata-sama, who worked hard for drawing out the map. Oosaku-sama and Itou-sama checked and edited, so thank you as well. I thank everybody who worked hard to help me make a thick volume, but to F-da-sama who doesn't think Overlord is very thick compared to other books he's in charge of, thank you as well. And to Jun Hani who, as a father, said "children are amazing" at the scene with Marquis Raeven, thank you very much, as always.

Although I can’t fit everyone in here, I thank everyone who took part in not just the novel, but in manga and Overlord animation as well!

And of course, my greatest thanks goes to those readers who have followed all of the volumes.

2015, June, Maruyama Kugane



ジルクニフ・ルーン・ファーロード・エル＝ニクス

Human
Race

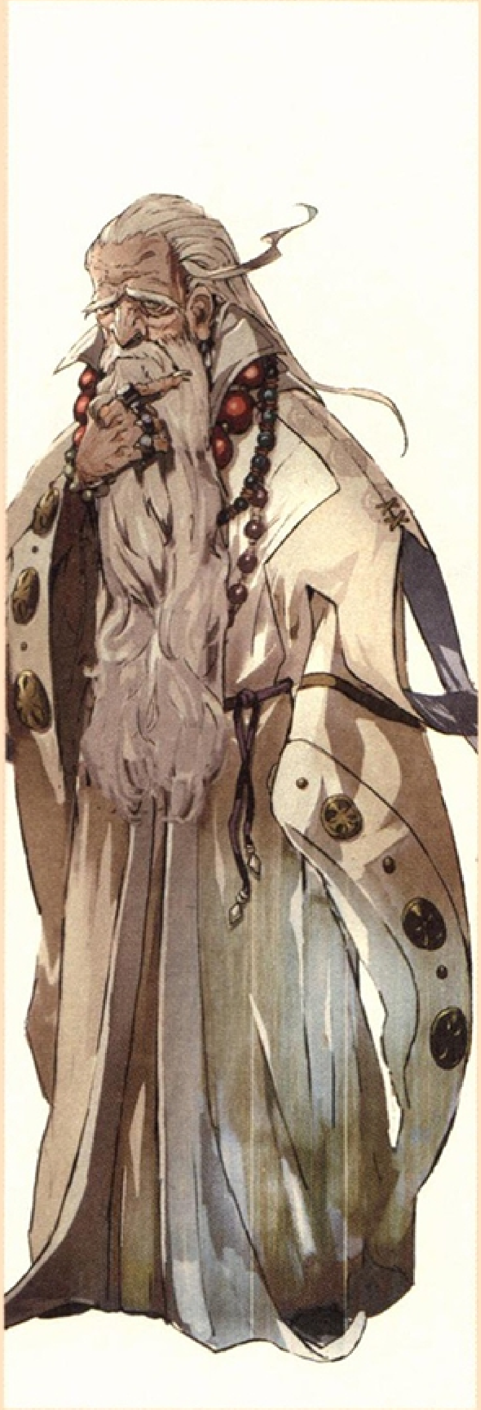
jircniv rune farlord el nix

BLOOD EMPEROR

Job	Emperor of Baharuth Empire	
Residence	The capital of Baharuth Empire	
Job Level	Emperor (average)	? lv
	High Emperor (average)	? lv
	Charisma (average)	? lv
	Others	
Birthday	Top Wind month 1st day	
Hobby	Gathering information on other countries and comparing them against Empire.	

{ personal character }

The Empire's young Emperor. A talented blue blood with nickname of "Blood Emperor". He took control of the Empire's knights and with that as base of power, purged the nobles. He did not marry, but has many children. However, he would abandon the child if he deems the child to be incompetent or otherwise unsuitable as future Emperor. Part of his heart is broken due to the fact his father, the former Emperor, was poisoned by his mother, the Empress, and because he had to execute several of his brothers after assuming the throne.



フールーダ・パラダイン

Human
Race

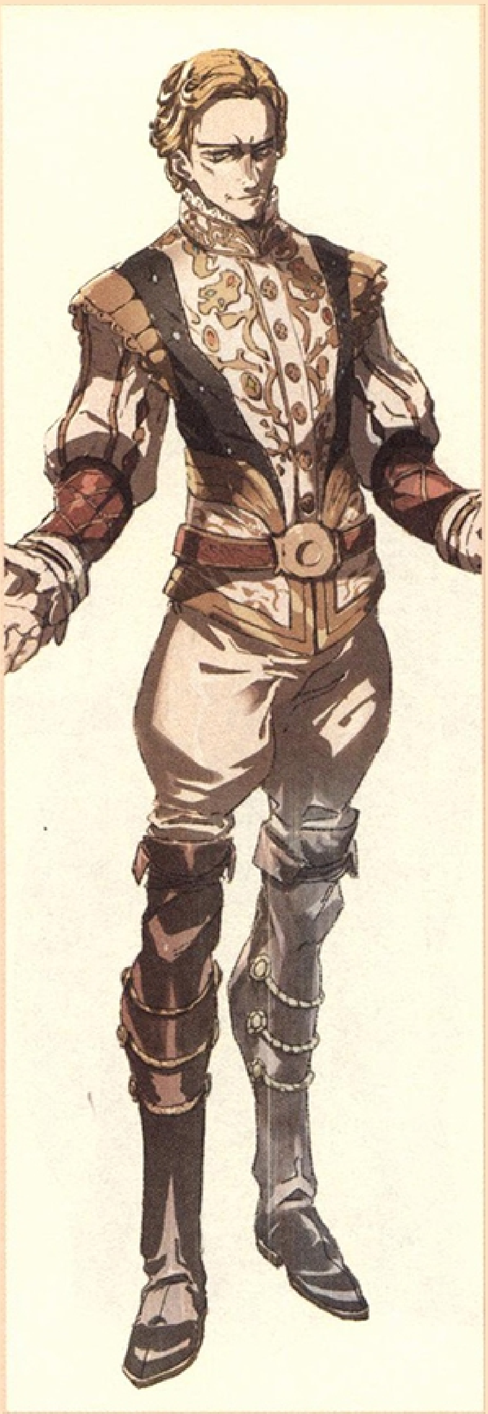
fluder paradyne

TRI-ARTS MAGIC CASTER

Job	Head Royal Magician	
Residence	Tower of the Great Magic Caster	
Job Level	Wizard	? lv
	Forbidden Arts Magic Caster	? lv
	Bishop	? lv
	Others	
Birthday	Too long ago to remember	
Hobby	Anything related to magic	

{ personal character }

Humans call those who overcome the limits of living being a hero and those who go beyond the limits of heroes an outlier. Fluder is one of those outliers and one of four human magician outliers in the entire continent. He stands outside the realm of a human being and combines three types of magic to create new ritual magic only he could use to extend his lifespan.



エリアス・ブラント・デイル・レエブン

Human Race

elias brandt dale raeven

EXTREMELY FOOLISH GREAT NOBLE

Job	Noble of Re-Estize Kingdom	
Residence	A mansion in E-Rantel	
Job Level	High Noble (Average)	? lv
	Sage	? lv
	Charisma (Average)	? lv
	Others	
Birthday	Lower Fire Month, 30th	
Hobby	Anything related to his child	

{ personal character }

A great noble who is feared by many nobles. He is a man who told his wife "I love you" only twice in his entire life. The first time was two days after the birth of his child and second time was on their anniversary when the child was two years old. The latter was spoken as passing word while not even looking at her face so it is debatable whether it should be counted at all. The reason he did not say it outloud was because he thought 'My wife would know how I really feel, so there's no need to say it outloud'.

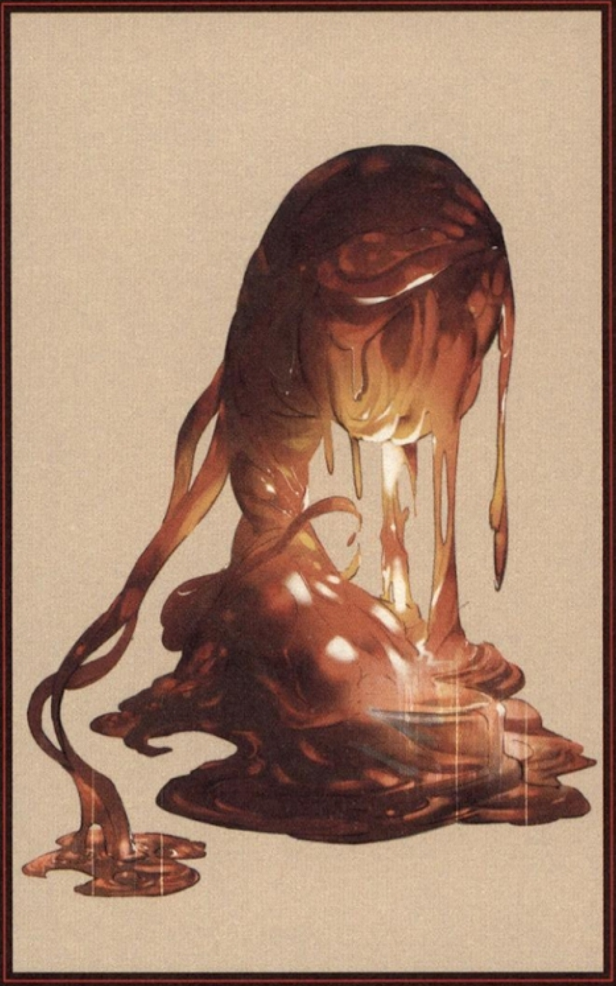
3/41

ぶくぶく茶釜

Heteromorphic Race

bukubukuchagama

Slime Shield



{ personal character }

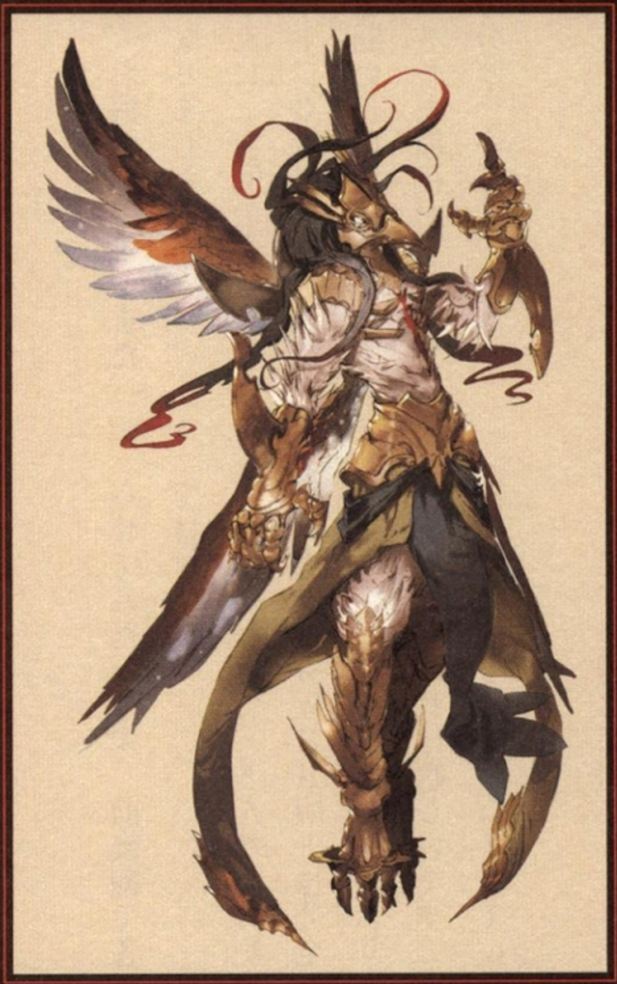
A famous voice actress that specialize in loli characters. She usually talks with high pitch tone she use for acting. When Peroroncino makes her mad, she will use her original deeper voice. Unexpectedly, she sounds good with that deeper tone too. Her character's stats are low, but she compensate with first class defensive items. Highly skilled as a player, she took on the role of commander during fights. When the whole guild is away, she will hold down the fort until they return.

4/41 ペロロンチーノ

Heteromorphic Race

peroroncino

Winged King of Explosive Strikes



personal character

"Technology development is prioritized for the military, then healthcare and followed by ero. That's how great ero is." A man who said this with no hesitation, that was how passionate he was about eroge. His sister, an eroge, an actress, he was great in internet debate. His character focused on archery and he was proficient in attacking from super long range with explosive skills. On the flip side, he is subpar in enclosed areas.

Postscript by So-bin

IT'S ALREADY VOLUME 9.
PLEASE WATCH THE ANIME
AND READ THE COMIC TOO.

So-bin